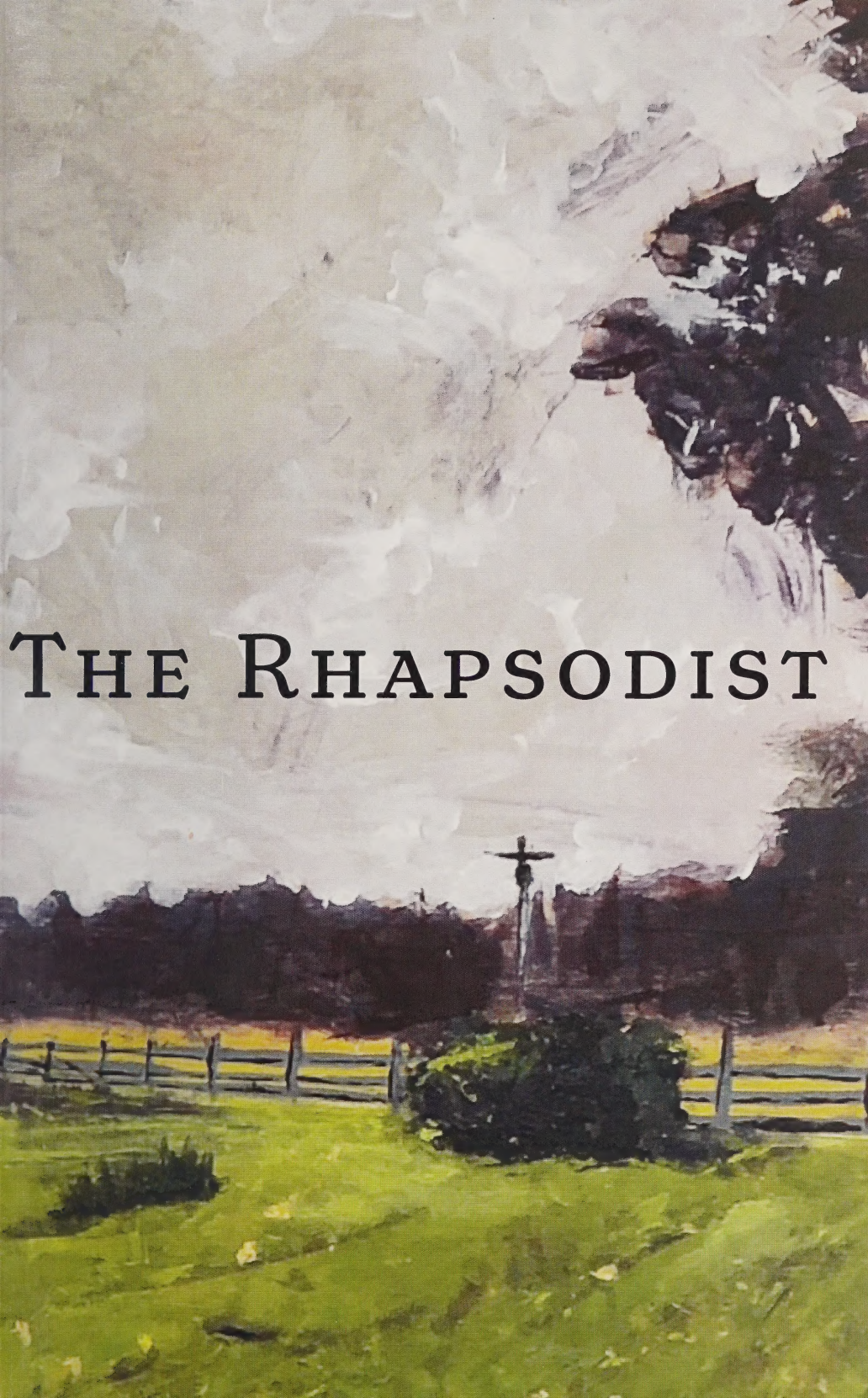
The Rhapsodist

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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2019

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
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rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsĕd ist/ , U.S. /'ræpsĕdist/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department

Editors' Note:

"All the world's a stage we're going through."

—Lorrie Moore

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We are excited to share a journal filled with imagination and meaningful transformation. Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*. Enjoy...

Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams.* Vintage, 1986.

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Brother/Sister

Ruby Marguerite Carlson

My brother and I were born in a nuclear household
A mother, a father
A girl and a boy

We were raised in a home where the change of the seasons always smelled the best.
The coming of autumn brought pumpkin and spices,
Spring is sunshine and cleaning supplies, long missed,
Winter is fire and pine,
Summer is sweet sweat and dust.

I was the patient reader
He, the energetic gamer

We were raised in a house of complaints
Of agreeing words with anger beneath them.
We were one another's support
And yet we fought,
as siblings do
Over trivial things

I am the only one who understands
He is the only one who understands

Our mother once said to me, on a long trip up a mountain
both of us in the back seat of a car beginning to smell of gasoline and mildew,
"Zane is more creative because he does not read as much as you do.

His ideas are of his own making."
My brother had not yet learned how to read.
A decision of his own making.

11, I was
He was 8.

We were raised in a home of friends who were family
Five of us in total:
The Inventor
The Story-Teller
The Problem-Solver
The Hidden Artist
The Convincer.
A life of our own, a family of our own
Far from nuclear
far from warfare

To me, it was my world
To him, it seemed a side quest

My brother built helicopters out of umbrellas and blankets.
I built stories out of plastic dolls and pieces of string
Spent time in my room and in my head
Feeling the disconnect from the world
The pounding of my door
"Ruby, come play!"
Was always ignored.

He was the inventor,
I, the storyteller.

We were born into a house of invisible entities
My brother saw spirits
Angels before he knew the word
Ghosts in the doorway
Demons in the closet
I, ever hopeful
saw nothing

I was wishful thinking
He was reckless action

We were born into a family of mental pain
A lineage of suffering and heartache
Look here and see us huddled on the bathroom floor
Look here and watch our screams pour from the seams of the house
Listen close and hear the voices of the television play late into the night
Distraction is the best medicine

He was depression
I was anxiety

We were born into a world of contradiction
Love where you came from
But pain is where you came from
Hold yourself close lest you lose it all

My brother was letting go
I was holding on too long
Both of us were nothing more than ghosts in the doorway

Solstice

Ellen J. Perry

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886

Longest night of the year so I'm going to make the most of it. Got nothing to lose. Hit every bar I can find out here in Atlanta, stumble around in the cold till I can finally grab on to some peace and daylight maybe. I just wish to God that Susan hadn't been so big into traditions and seasons and poems and all that business about the Celts and Druids, or maybe they were the same thing, I don't know. Who the hell knows. But now that she's gone, really gone, just three months dead, as gone now as she'll be in a hundred thousand years, I can't stop thinking about those winter solstice rituals she'd make me and Tommy do. We fussed, threatened to tell her mama and the preacher she was into that pagan stuff, but we ended up doing the rituals every year – lighting candles, reading the poem about snow-on-snow, sitting by the fireplace, being quiet, holding still. That was the worst part for me, being still. I'm a man of action, got to keep moving. This night I march down the city streets, ready to blast through the darkness like a flame but starting to sway dizzy-headed to the beat of *snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

Me and Susan got married in December, well, it would have been 23 years yesterday. She loved winter, everything to do with it. Didn't get a whole lot of snow in Rome, Georgia, but when we did, boy, Tommy and his friends had a big time going out and

rolling around in it. We wanted a sister or brother for Tommy but it didn't happen, so we just pretty much adopted the neighborhood kids. Susan had a way with them, knew how to make snow cream and teach kids stuff without them hardly knowing they were learning, she was so much fun. I learned a whole lot too, didn't realize how much till now. *Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.* See, I can remember just about every line of that poem she loved, even though all I want to do is forget it, forget everything and pretend like none of it happened, pretend she's still waiting on me at home in Rome and I'm just out on a business trip. But I'm alone in the darkest night I've ever known, and Tommy is so tore up he won't even hardly talk, refuses to believe me when I tell him I wasn't drinking that night the car crashed and his mom didn't make it. "I'm so sorry, she didn't make it," the man at the hospital said, but I still can't believe it, because she made everything, did everything, showed us all how life could run smooth like the seasons.

Whiskey's starting to sink in because I near about run into this lady right outside the big Congregational church in Atlanta, must have been midnight. Bells are ringing sad and slow, not like happy fast Christmas chimes. Then I hear that damn organ in there and get a little rowdy, start hollering, it's like those heavy notes are knocking me down, down even lower than I am, down to where I can't get up and I don't remember falling but I think I did, because a man comes out of the church and puts me in the back pew till I can get steady.

A blonde lady in front of me turns around and hands me a program that says "Longest Night Service." She looks at me friendly-like but her eyes are sad. Her and everybody in here, all twenty or so people in this gigantic church, look like they been beat up pretty bad by something. They just stare straight ahead like ghosts, empty-handed shadows in the flickering candlelight, and nobody moves but the man playing the organ.

Susan settles down beside me, I can feel her shoulder brush up next to mine, she's wanting me to listen to the three strangers up front. "I yell out to my God," one of them reads from the program. "I yell with all my might, I go over the days one by one, the High God goes out of business just the moment I need him."

I perk up. The ghosts in the pews all read, together, "Will God walk off and leave us for good? Has he stalked off and left us?" I try to find the place in my program so I can read out loud too but my head spins so I just let go and listen, I sit still and quiet, for once I surrender and close my eyes.

The second person reads, "Teach us the lessons of endings: children growing, friends leaving, loved ones dying, grieving over, grudges over, blaming over, excuses over."

Tears come, I haven't cried at all since Susan's funeral. Blonde lady in front of me won't take off her black coat with the fuzzy fur neck, which aggravates me for some reason, but she hands me a Kleenex and I settle down. Some people stand and sing while the organ man plays, others don't.

The last speaker reads, "O God, grant us a sense of your timing."

The ghosts repeat, "Grant us a sense of your timing."

Call and response, call and response. I don't respond, the words won't form.

The minister asks us to say our lost loved ones' names, and I can only whisper it, "Susan, Susan." I whisper, "Susan," and I watch people go forward to light the candles but I'm terrified and paralyzed. It's all winding down, and what will I do next? Where will I go, who am I without my wife to light the way?

"I leave you with words from an Irish blessing," a man's voice calls from the front as if answering the panicky questions rolling around in my mind.

When times are hard, may hardness never turn your heart

to stone.

Amen, amen, the organ blasts out the chords, and amen, the ghosts are slowly resurrected and moving toward the door to leave but I'm earth like iron, water like stone, so heavy and lost I just sit there.

"It's only a tilt," the blonde lady leans down and says softly to me. She's young but old, both somehow, at the same time. "We're tilted the farthest away from the sun right now. But tonight is the worst of it. Slowly the days will get longer, daylight comes back."

"Slow and steady," says the man who comes to help me up out of the pew, and then the blonde lady is gone, disappearing like magic into the night. Susan is gone too. Even the cold mean moon keeps her distance while I wait outside. But this taxi driver weaving through Atlanta traffic gets how I'm feeling, because he keeps singing, "Ain't no sunshine when she's gone," and I nod and sing right back, "I know, I know, I know."

Sacre Coeur Scrawl in Prime 35

Ben Latter

A Surgeon's Hymn

Christian E. Donaldson

A Surgeon enters
Cold, unemotional
Scalpel in hand
Easy, controllable.

Suction and stitch
It's all a routine
Surgeon and scalpel
A proper machine

Going into V-Fib;
The heart is affected
The Organ and heart
Must be connected

Remember the protocols:
Begin the compressions
Shock the patient
Give epinephrine

This patient is hopeless
Can't seem to recover
As if the Organ was joy
And she, its Mother

Deathbed Assurances

Kayla Sessoms

They finally gave us a bigger room at the hospital. We were in the Hospice suite. The hall was quiet, the fluorescent lights more yellow than white, blending with the tan walls and cream-colored tile flooring. The sweet, dark-skinned woman at the reception desk would always smile and point her long pink nail down a hallway whenever one of us had a question, as if scared to disrupt the silence with directions.

There were eight of us, nine including Grandpa. I had a hard time determining if he "counted" or not, since he was the one in the elevated hospital bed. Other than him, it was Grandma, Mom, Dad, Uncle Aaron, his wife Brooke, Uncle Tony, my sister Lily, and me. We still had one person missing.

Grandpa had Type 2 diabetes and about twenty other things going on. Fluid kept filling his lungs; his heart kept wanting to stop. The first scare had come on Wednesday. Mom called us, frantic, telling my sister to leave work and me to leave school. Mom and dad had already left for Georgia. Lily and I chucked clothes and our toothbrushes in a bag and leapt into her Camry, speeding away from Asheville. I don't remember a moment when we were going under 80 miles an hour.

The arrival at my grandparents' house in Jesup was even more frantic than the car ride there. Mom was hiding her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking convulsively. Dad was holding her securely in his arms, a determined look on his face. The hospice nurse was working with the emergency crew to transition Grandpa from his bed to a stretcher. I gasped every time someone bumped into something. My grandparents had a small house with lots of furniture, plus, Grandpa was no small man; it took three people to

move him to the stretcher.

***

During the day, we all sat in the hospital room with him. My mom and uncles occasionally said something like, "It's okay, Dad," or "Just rest, Dad."

The room was divided into two sections. The first, when you walked right through the door, was my grandpa's area. His bed, all the machines he was hooked up to, a small table for his meals, and cabinets attached to the wall with instruments for the nurses. A small archway led to a smaller area designated for family. There were two more chairs in there with a comfy couch under a window and a small TV that we had turned down. The TV was always on, but no one ever watched it.

My mom constantly stayed with my grandpa. Her, grandma, and Uncle Aaron were the usual occupants of Grandpa's room. They were closest with him. The rest of us stayed in the other room, eating the bags of junk food that my parents bought everyone, just for something to do, talking in hushed voices about Grandpa and everything else.

"The nurse says it'll probably happen this weekend," Uncle Tony said.

The "it" was my grandpa dying.

I glanced at Lily, and she held my gaze, her hazel eyes widened slightly, flickering to look through the archway at our grandpa before resting on me again. I pulled my eyebrows together and frowned slightly. She looked away.

"I think that he's waiting on her to come and see him. He wants to make sure she'll be okay," my dad answered Tony.

Our Aunt Lisa hadn't arrived at the hospital yet. All of my grandpa's children lived at least two hours away, and they all got to the hospital before his daughter that lives down the street.

Whenever the children left Grandpa and Grandma alone in his room, all they talked about was Lisa. Her bad credit, her psycho

husband, her delinquent children, even her diet. Although we all had eaten more than our fair share of Little Debbie snacks and Lays chips in the past few days.

"Dad gave her money to get her teeth fixed, and what does she do?" Mom whispered, "goes out and buys herself a Dodge Camaro!"

My uncles would all grunt in agreement and shake their heads.

"I always felt sorry for you having to share a room with her," Uncle Tony told my mom, "having to live in her pig sty."

Mom bristled, "Trust me, I was feeling sorry for myself too." She sat for a moment, thinking, then went on, "But have you seen what she lives in now? That trailer is infested with roaches, there's old food sitting out on the counter, cigarette butts littering the floors. I don't know how she does it."

My uncles shook their heads.

I leaned forward on the couch and peeked at Grandpa in his bed. The covers were right up to his neck, so all you could see was a huge lump of his body and then his round, bald head, poking out at the top. His bright blue eyes were open and aware, they locked onto mine instantly. I smiled slightly, hoping he couldn't hear what his children were saying about their sister.

"I think," Mom whispered to her brothers, "that he's waiting to go until he can see she'll be okay and taken care of."

She wiped at her face violently, the rings on her fingers clanking together. The door to the room swung open with so much force it slammed into the opposite wall and rebounded on the intruder.

With a slight, "Argh," my Aunt Lisa held the door steady and shuffled into the room, closing it gently behind her. Everyone stopped their conversations mid-sentence and looked up at her.

Lisa had obviously just gotten off work. Her blue Walmart

vest was stretched tightly over her large bust and stomach. The fabric of the vest had clung to her shirt underneath and caused the shirt to be cinched up, so that everyone saw her belly button protruding over the waistband of her jeans. It reminded me of when I would leave a frozen quesadilla in the microwave too long, and the artificial cheese would ooze out the sides. Her long, frizzy hair was middle-parted and hung down limply to her chest, where a V-neck shirt revealed small red circular scars patterned below her clavicles, like small crescent moons.

My mom told me that Lisa liked to smoke lying in bed and would let the hot ash from the cigarette butts fall onto her chest.

"Well hey, everybody!" Lisa said with cheer. She smiled so largely her cheeks pushed up the large gold-wire glasses she wore over her glassy eyes past her eyebrows. The mole on the right side of her lips was lost in the crease of her grin. She looked down at my grandpa lying miserably in his bed.

"Hey, daddy!"

My sister looked back at me and raised her eyebrows, mouthing *wow*. I nodded.

***

At some point in the night—no one had looked at a clock or their phone in ages—the hospice nurse checked on Grandpa, who was sleeping fitfully, then motioned Grandma into the hall to talk to her.

Grandma returned, her thin wrinkled face drawn in, eyelids low.

"We just need to pray for it to be fast," she whispered to her children, her voice cracking. "He's in a lot of pain."
As if to accentuate this point, Grandpa wheezed a loud, wet cough in his sleep.

No one else slept. We were on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the final push off, for the plummet. Everyone stared at different points on the dull wall. Looking at nothing and nobody.

"He's waiting on you, Lisa," my mom said finally. It could have been hours or minutes.

"What 'chu talkin' 'bout, he's waitin' on me?" Lisa spat. She had taken residence in one of the chairs. Mom, Dad, Aaron, and Brooke all had the couch, Tony was in the last chair, and Kelsey and I had been subjected to the floor, our backs leaning against our parents' legs. Grandma was still in Grandpa's room.

"He doesn't know if you'll be okay, Lisa," Uncle Tony piped in, rubbing his jaw line.

"I'm okay!" Lisa insisted, "Why would I not be okay?"

"Well," Tony said. It was a three-sibling gang up. "Your trailer, and your job, and your kids..."

Lisa's daughter, who was Lily's age, 24, was going into her third marriage, and her son had just received a call from an ex-girlfriend claiming that he had a kid.

"I'm fine," Lisa replied, drawing out the "i" in her southern drawl.

"Daddy obviously doesn't think so," my mom retorted.

Lisa crossed her arms and turned her nose up. "Y'all all think you're better an' smarter than me. Well, you're not! I just got a promotion at Walmart, and I have more friends than y'all. People's always askin' me to go out with them."

Each of the siblings gave each other a "look" and rolled their eyes.

"Lisa," Aaron tried, "we do not think that. We just want to make sure that you're going to be all right, because Dad won't be able to support you anymore. You'll have to make decisions about money yourself. Dad wants to make sure you can do that before he... passes on."

Lisa shook her head and didn't answer. The room got quiet again.

At some point, Lily and I dozed, my head on her shoulder, her head on top of mine. I woke up to whispers and opened my eyes

without moving, so Lily wouldn't be roused as well.

Lisa was in Grandpa's room. The purple light of dawn illuminated her bending down over his bed, holding his hand.

"I'm gonna be fine, Daddy," she soothed. "You don't gotta worry 'bout me. I'm okay, see?" She smiled a toothy grin.

Grandpa nodded his head ever so slightly. I closed my eyes again.

The next time I awoke, yellow light illuminated the rooms. My family was up and moving, throwing empty chip bags away, straightening furniture back to its home.

With a start, I realized Grandpa wasn't in his bed anymore. Lily and I were the only ones who had slept through everything.

"Girls," my dad said softly—my mom and grandma were both gone—"you guys should go ahead and drive home, okay? Pull over if you get sleepy. Love you." Then he left the room as well.

Lily and I said nothing. We gathered our things and got in the car. Neither one of us seemed keen on breaking the stillness. I drove.

Three hours into the drive back home, Lily turned on the radio. It was so weird to hear noise, I jumped. She turned it down to where I almost couldn't hear it. But the stillness had been broken, finally.

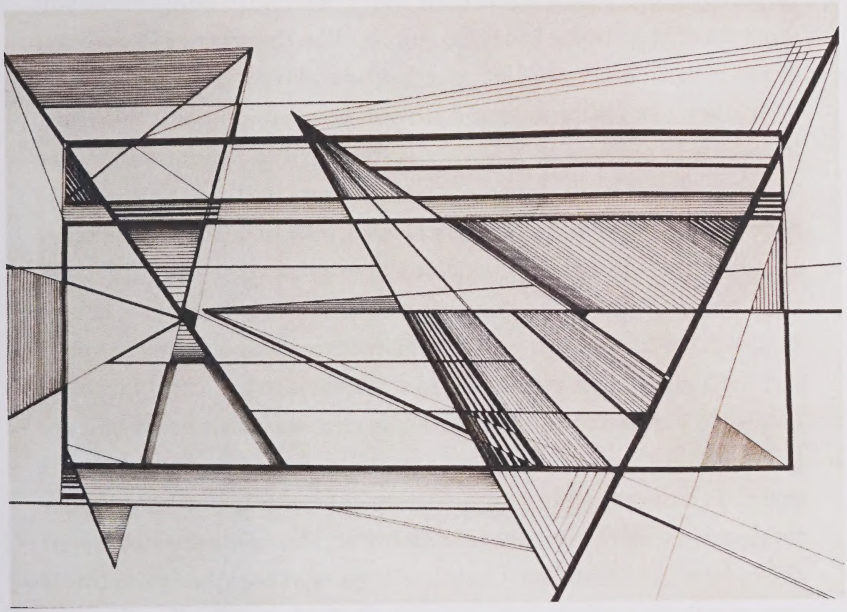
"I'm happy that we aren't like that," she said, punching me lightly on the shoulder.

She didn't have to explain. "Yeah," I smiled. My throat was starting to close up and my eyes stung. "Me too."

We drove the rest of the way home singing along to the radio, occasionally wiping away tears when the other wasn't looking.

Through the Wave

Reginald Jackson



Out of Mist, Away from Home

Ruby Marguerite Carlson

Walk fast when you're lonely; let your heart beat until you cannot breathe; keep your head down; dig your fingernails into your arms until it hurts; let it hurt; run; I know you don't want to go home today, so run; act like the warrior I know you are so bent on becoming; let your feet pound the earth until it hurts your soles, until it hurts your soul; puff your breath hard; this time, breathing is not a symbol of your suffering; it is a sign that you are alive; so, goddammit, breathe; this is how to bash your knees; this is how to be relieved that it hurts; this is how to deal with the relief that it hurts; this is how to ignore the worried voice of your friend; this is how to ignore the chastising voices in your head; this is how to watch the blood flow; watch it mix with mud and fading summer air; don't wash it off yet, let those scars set into beautiful marks of battle, so you can look even more like that warrior I know you are so bent on becoming; know that you are made of blood and screams and dark summer nights, so hold onto that; this is how to grit your teeth against it; this is how to walk faster; this is how to run faster; this is how to let your heart beat until you can't breathe again; this is how you feel the rhythm of the heart beats that will call out to you, to those who will fall for you and catch you right back; run when you feel alone; run so you don't feel alone; when you're running you can feel free; you say you hate running; you're lying girl, stop lying girl; this is how to embrace the freedom; this is how to embrace the wind, and the wild, and the blood; this is your blood on the rocks; this is your blood in the stream; this is your blood, the blood you watch flow with patience and understanding; you should be crying girl; you should be wailing girl; I understand why you're not; this is how to fulfill the role of the warrior I know you have already become; I

know there is still blood in you yet, so fight on; *but what if I have no more strength to fight?*; you mean to say that after all this time that wasn't the reason you were fighting in the first place?

Grace and Mercy

Meagan Lucas

The tires of their station wagon rumbled over the washboard corners of the dirt road. Annabelle pressed herself into the passenger door to stop the sway of her body that threatened to send her into the cave of Jimmy's armpit with every curve. His bare arm was stretched across the back of the bench seat, his fingers tapping mindlessly on the vinyl right behind her ear. The energy of his body was crowding her, prickling her skin with arrows of unsaid accusation.

A trip to the river for a picnic was the least of a list of terrible options. She refused to take the girls downtown to a parade, or to the church BBQ to be stared at. A holiday should mean a break for her too; she shouldn't have to have her guard up every day. She'd watched him grow agitated each time she'd said no to a suggestion.

"Okay, sure," he'd said the first time, ready with another plan on the tip of his tongue. By the fourth his back teeth were grinding and the vein in his forehead was raised. "Do you just wanna stay here then? Celebrate the nation's birthday with all the excitement of grass mowing and laundry?"

She was about to tell him that she'd bought some rocket pops for the girls and beer for him, certain that he'd sigh and put his anger in his pocket for another time, when she thought of the river. Jimmy loved the river, he'd stand in the rippling water until his feet turned numb and his lips blue.

"What about a picnic?" she'd said. "At Tamassee?"

His eyes lit up. She'd won, however temporarily.

She took her sweet time getting ready, leaving him to take care of the girls while she locked herself in the bathroom. Mostly

she just sat on the closed toilet seat, smoked a cigarette out the window, and relished the quiet. When he'd checked on her the first time, she ran the tap and told him she was shaving her legs. When he'd checked the second, she asked him if the girls were ready. She emerged from the bathroom, still in her pajamas just as he was coming to check a third time.

"Almost!" she said, brushing past him in the hall, and closing their bedroom door behind her with a thud. She pulled her bathing suit over her prickly legs and threw a sundress over top. When she found them on the porch the girls were coiled springs and Jimmy had packed a basket of sandwiches and beer.

"No towels?" she said into his disbelieving face, and stepped back into the house. She breathed deeply as she crammed old towels into a grocery bag. It was going to be a long day. She needed to save some of her energy to use as a salve later.

In the car, he'd tried to start a conversation with her three times. The first he'd made the mistake of asking a "yes" or "no" question and she'd just nodded. The second she made him repeat twice. The third she just ignored, focusing on her breathing and the chisel lodging itself behind her right ear.

The parking lot at the river access was jammed with cars. Annabelle's pulse raced and her hands grew damp. Jimmy drove onto a grassy area and turned off the car.

"You can't park here," she said.

"Sure I can."

She looked at him for the first time since they got in the car.

"There isn't anywhere else. It's here, or we leave," he said. "I'm not leaving."

Goosebumps rose on her arms and thighs despite the heat of the day.

He grabbed their bags and they made their way down the trail to the river slowly. Jimmy walked ahead of her and stopped

repeatedly to point out some detail of nature to the children. The path emerged at a beach, the best place for swimming, but also the most crowded, and where they would draw the most attention. "Not here," she hissed, as he moved to put their bags down in the only bare spot visible. "Let's keep going a bit. See if it thins out."

A crease emerged between his brows as shouldered the bag again. They followed the trail for another few minutes as it pulled away from the river and mounted a ridge.

"This is silly, Belle. Let's just go back. People will make space for children."

"There's another good spot just a bit farther."

He sighed, but turned and helped pull each of the girls up the steep incline. The trail headed back to the sound of the water and Annabelle breathed a sigh too. She didn't actually know where this trail went, or if there was any better stop than the one they'd walked past. She just knew that she couldn't take being in such a public place, with her daughters in so few clothes. She couldn't stand the stares, whispers, and questions as their flesh and her shame was exposed.

She could hear the rush of the water before she could see it. She knew that meant it wasn't good for swimming, but that they would be alone. The trees opened to a clearing next the river, the water was moving fast and she could see boulders beneath the surface.

"See?" she said.

"You can't let them go in the water here!"

She looked at him, their eyes meeting, hers narrowed. "Sure I can."

"Belle, you can't seriously think that they'll be alright in the water here. It would take out a grown man."

Annabelle pulled her hair back from her face. She felt the crack in her voice as she began to speak: "I can't do it today. I can't handle it."

"It's not that bad. You're blowing it way out of proportion."

"You don't have to deal with it every day. You don't know the shame—"

"I don't?" he asked.

She looked at the ground.

He shifted his load and reached out his hands to the children. "Come on, girls," he said. "Just a little bit farther."

A few minutes down the trail they found a shallower, slower moving bend in the river. The tension in Annabelle's shoulders pulled tighter when she saw another family had already set up camp there. Jimmy just looked at her, and put the bags down under a tree. "See girls? Perfect spot. Your mama knew what she was looking for. We'll have some lunch, and then we'll go swimming!"

The twins shrieked and Annabelle's stomach churned as she spread the blanket. Jimmy talked to the girls as he ate; the twins crammed peanut butter and jelly into their faces. Annabelle watched the river, holding a sandwich in her hands. She could hear the murmur of the family just across the clearing and feel it in her body, the high points of their laughter like screws turning in her chest: waiting for the moment they noticed, really noticed, the girls. She watched the water break against the rocks, white froth forming where the river tore in two to find its way past the jagged obstacle. She wondered if that was what happened to her five years ago. Perhaps her soul had split when she met Thomas. Perhaps there was another version of her living with him somewhere. She wondered if that version was happy.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. The other family was packing up. Their children were already headed down the path. The mom and dad made a train with the cooler between them. A knot inside Annabelle's chest loosened. It was going to be okay. They would be alone soon. She was watching the grandpa hoist lawn chairs over his shoulder when a hat and a t-shirt landed

in her lap. She looked up.

"Go swimming!" Mercy squealed, standing in front of Annabelle in just her swimsuit, skin luminous in the sun.

Grace was bent over, struggling to get out of her t-shirt. It was caught on her hat. Jimmy was nowhere to be seen.

"Go swimming!" Mercy said again, louder.

The marks on her daughters still stole Annabelle's breath. Three and a half years had done nothing to dull the shock. As the girls grew, so did the purple stains that covered their skin. Mercy's face was eighty percent covered. Only her left eye and a bit of her cheek were spared. Grace had more clear skin, her mouth and chin were peach and pale. Marks that had once been light on their necks and shoulders were darkening. Mercy had spots where the stain had thickened and raised. Annabelle didn't want to admit that she cared what people thought, but she'd spent more and more time in their house in the last few years, and she dreaded the day that was coming in just over a year when she would register them for kindergarten. Annabelle had been a teacher. She knew what the girls were in for; what she was in for. As the sun shone down on Mercy's now bare skin, she glowed. Annabelle pulled her daughter down into her lap and wrapped her arms around her. "Where's Daddy?" she asked.

"He went pee," Mercy said.

"Come here, Gracie," Annabelle called. "I'll help you before you hurt yourself."

Annabelle pulled Grace's t-shirt back down so she could remove the hat first. She was pulling the shirt back over Grace's head when an unfamiliar voice stole her attention.

"Beautiful dark hair your girls have."

Annabelle turned to find the grandmother from the other group standing next to their blanket.

"Your husband must have dark hair."

Annabelle's mouth stretched across her teeth in the

approximation of a smile.

"They have your skin though," the old woman said.

"Oh?" Annabelle whispered, her eyes bouncing between her daughter's skin and her own. *This woman could see that?*

"You're so fair. Most redheads are, but it's less common with the raven hair. They look like tiny Snow Whites. It's beautiful. Lucky girls."

Annabelle held her breath, waiting, used to flagellation in the form of strangers' comments. She could hear crashing in the woods and Jimmy emerged from behind a tree.

"C'mon girls, let's go swimming!" he said, followed by, "oh, hello there."

"Don't let me keep you from your fun," the grandmother said, her head tipping to the side as she studied his flaxen hair. "These are your girls?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said and grabbed the twins hands and pulled them toward the river.

Annabelle could feel the old woman's eyes. Annabelle refused to turn and make eye contact. Refused to participate in her own torture. She allowed herself to breathe again when she hear the flip flop of the older woman's sandals in the grass.

Annabelle could still smell her perfume. Avon Soft Musk, the same perfume that her own mother wore. The words that the old woman said burned into her. The girls did have her skin, the skin that should have been hers. They wore the shame that she felt inside, on the outside. Those marks should have been staining her face. *It would have been easier*, she thought. *More just.*

Her eyes slid to her husband, her girls just feet away. His hands were on each of their shoulders, their toes in the water. He was pointing into the trees on the other side of the river, and then down into the water itself. She shook her head thinking about how much better he was at it than her, how much better he was at everything. He found joy in sharing what he knew; Annabelle didn't

know what she found joy in. Being alone, maybe, allowing her thoughts to wander.

She lay down, and lifted the hem of her dress to expose her knees to the tingle of the sun. The breeze blew through her hair and across her face. She allowed herself to forget about the frown on the old woman's face, about the secret simmering just under the surface and the guilt that was drowning her. She allowed herself to think of Thomas' fingers wrapped around her braid, the palm of his hand cupping the back of her hip. She felt his mouth on her throat and the weight of his body on top of hers. She breathed deeply and imagined the scent of his skin: salt and wood smoke. Warmth and comfort spread over her and the sound of the water rushing past lulled her to almost sleep when suddenly Jimmy was screaming her name.

"Belle, get Grace!"

She sat up, rubbed her eyes. Jimmy was out in the middle of the river.

"Get Grace!" he screamed, red-faced, before floating out of sight.

Annabelle shook her head. She could only see one little girl. Pink swimsuit. It was Grace, and she was out too deep. Annabelle ran to the water's edge and rushed in, fully dressed. The water was shockingly cold, she was disoriented and lightheaded.

She searched the water for a path to Grace. There were too many rocks to swim, so she stumbled out until the water was chest high, and grabbed her daughter who teetered on a boulder. Grace sobbed, snot running down her face and her birthmark red and angry. Her tiny fingers dug into Annabelle's soft flesh.

"Not so tight, Gracie. You're hurting me."

Grace's grip didn't loosen.

Annabelle pulled Grace from the boulder, and the girl clung to her mother in the rushing water, her fingers like pliers gripping and tearing. Annabelle wrestled the small arms from her

neck, from the soft flesh beside her breasts and turned the girl around, trapping Grace's arms beneath her own. They both watched the river flow past them and around the corner. Jimmy and Mercy were nowhere to be seen. Annabelle looked to the empty banks and screamed for help.

Trapped in the current, and chest high in the river, Annabelle thought about what life would be like if Jimmy didn't come back. If Mercy didn't come back.

She swallowed the water that had collected in her mouth and took a step deeper into the river.

"Dirt, Mama. Beach," Grace said, water choking her words.

Annabelle couldn't escape the idea of what could be. Of how much better everything could be, if only... She watched a movie of Grace's curls bobbing down the river play through her mind. Then she let one of her arms float.

She remembered a little boy being swept away when she was a girl. He had been terrible to her at Sunday school, whispering hateful names in her ear, tripping her in the gravel parking lot and poking her with sticks until her belly and buttocks were spotted. She had been glad when she heard that he was gone, but then everything changed. First it had been his parents, begging the locals to search the riverbank for their precious boy. Annabelle would have never described him as precious. Then the Pastor at her church announced from the pulpit that although they hadn't found his body, certainly with a boy that good, Jesus was holding him and comforting him now. Death was the great scouring pad, scrubbing one clean of their misdeeds, of their cruelty and lies. The idea filled Annabelle with hope.

How easy it would be, she thought, *to pull her feet up, or to relax her other arm.* She laid her head back in the water and looked up at the clouds. Birds flew across her field of vision, from one side of the river to the other. This water, that trapped people and land beasts on one side or the other, was no boundary for the

birds. Annabelle wondered what it might be like to live without boundaries, without rules.

Her arm relaxed. Grace thrashed and screamed. Her fingernails raked down Annabelle's skin.

"Hold on!" came a cry from the beach. "Hold on missus, I'mma comin'."

Annabelle made her hand into a fist and rolled her wrist to break Grace's grasp.

"Almost there!" came the voice again.

Annabelle was out of time. Her heart beat hard, she needed to hurry. She could still feel fingers digging into her wrist. Still hear Grace's watery screams. There was splashing and shouting and finally her arm was free of fingers.

She pulled her feet up.

She closed her eyes.

One instant of freedom passed before someone grabbed her ankle and pulled her thrashing into the shallows.

Annabelle fought the urge to rip her foot away and dive back into the water. She was too tired to fight. They rolled her to her side and pounded on her back. She just listened to the hollow sound that came from her chest. She'd already known she was empty.

There were small fingers pulling at her cheeks, at her eyes. She opened them. Grace was looking at her. Grace had boogers all over her face. A middle aged man wrapped a towel around Grace and set her to the side. He knelt beside Annabelle. "Are you okay, ma'am?" he asked. Annabelle closed her eyes.

When she opened them Jimmy had both of the girls in his arms. They were all wet. Mercy's lips were blue. Jimmy reached over and cupped Annabelle's cheek. For the millionth time she wondered if he knew. Her guilt and shame were spread all over those girls' bodies. She couldn't look at them without the pain flooding her chest and stealing her breath. If it was so obvious what she'd done

that a stranger could see it, couldn't he? She wanted him to yell. She wanted him to rage and threaten and let her be the victim instead of the asshole for once. Maybe if he was angry she could regret it, and be released. Instead he pushed her wet hair out of her eyes and smiled, and Annabelle burned with the agony of knowing she couldn't share this guilt, it was hers alone, and she could never be forgiven. She closed her eyes and wished for the nothingness to finally swallow her.

Perspective

Wesley M. Osigian

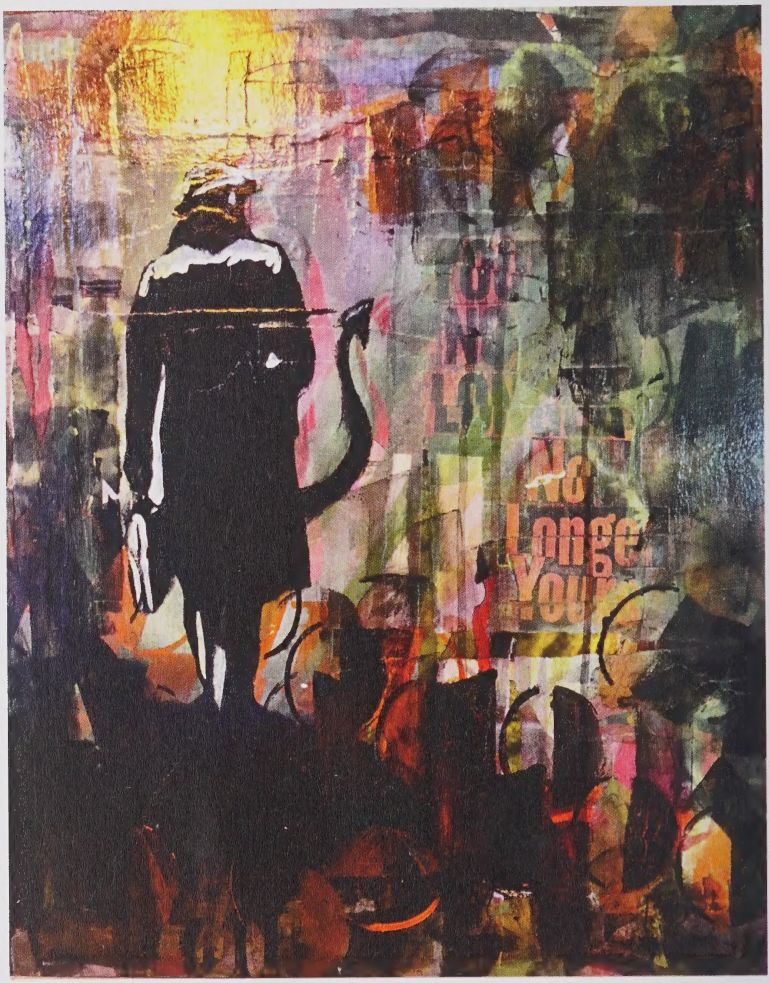
Her waist was thin,
Her shoulders delicate and soft.
She was the worst pig he'd ever bought.

Etymon Quadrangle

Mark Damon Puckett

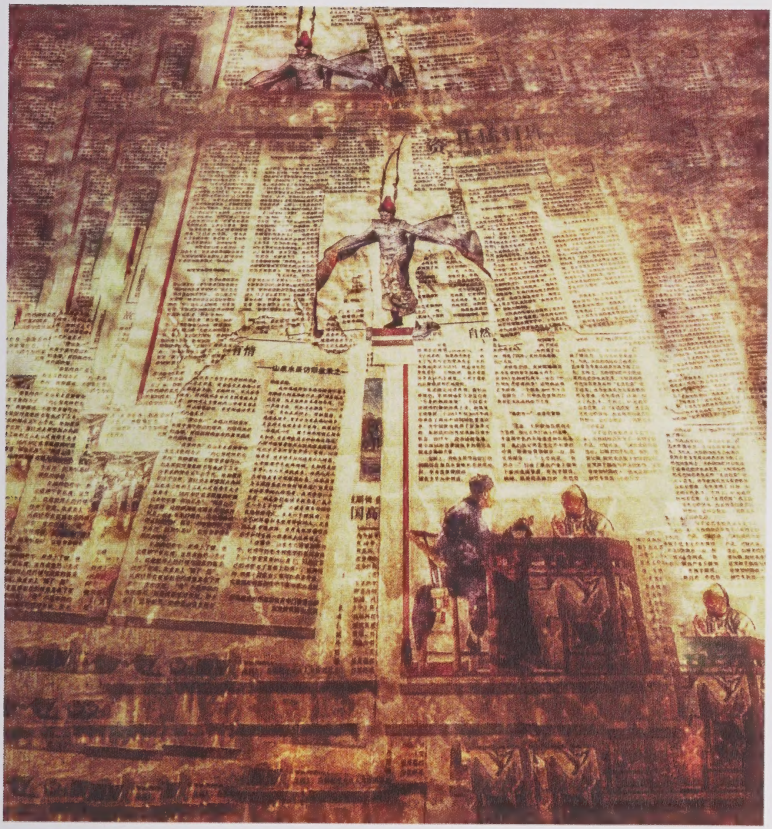
Yours No Longer, No Longer Yours

Todd M. Lemiesz



Perception Changes Everything

Jackson W. S. Miller

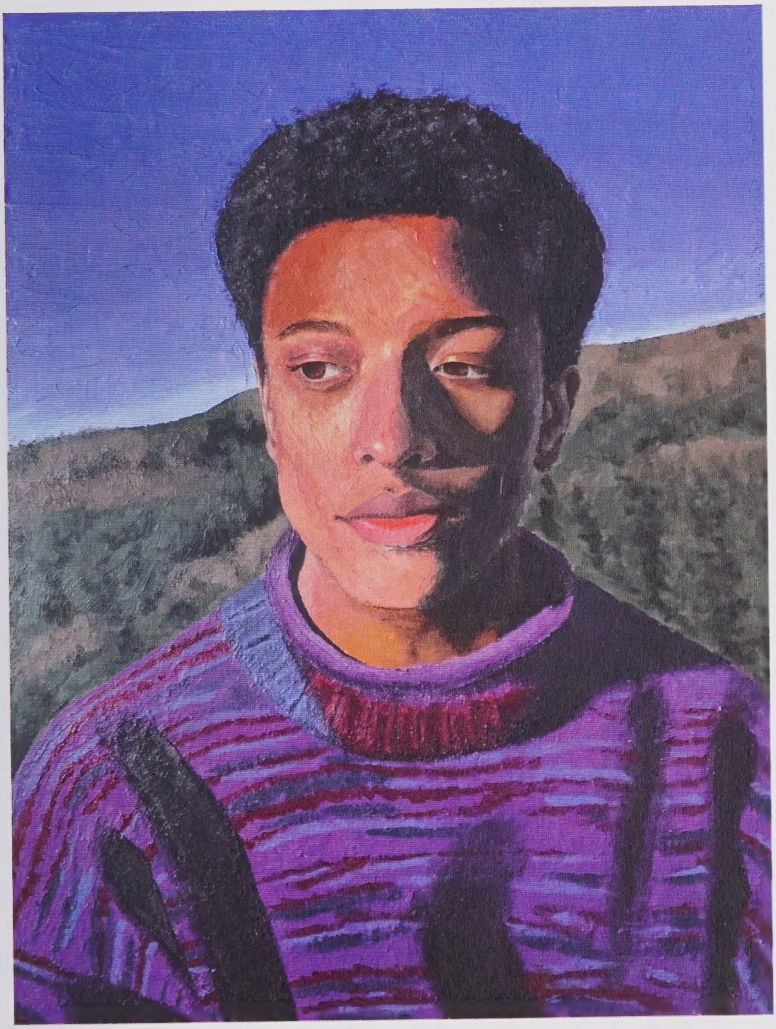


Butterflies in My Stomach

Yana Babak

Self Portrait

Reginald Jackson

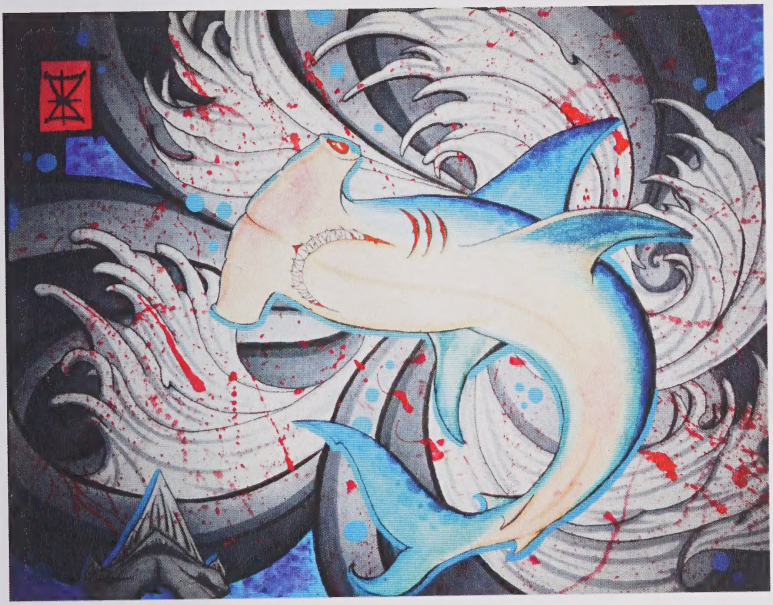


Fountain in Peru

Nicole O. Lavoie

Troubled Waters

Lex C. Brenner

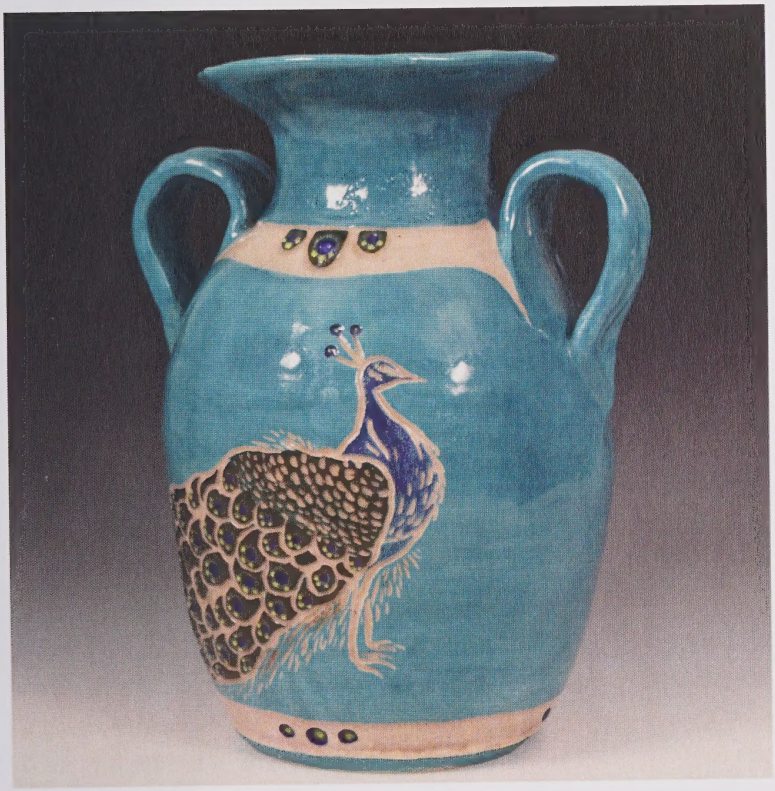


Lemon Study

Reginald Jackson

Reign of the Peacock

Summer Brianna Whiteside



i

Mark Damon Puckett

i
walk
by rivers
in
cities

go into
the rivers
all of the
cities i've
walked

stare at
brown water
thick and
still as
milk

and my eyes
are pleased
that they
are too
shallow to
drown me

Henge

John D. Shackelton

We stopped at Stone Henge
to reverence the mystery
But couldn't find it on the observer side
of the barrier amongst the milling
crowd with earphones that explained it all
and cameras that would contain it.

But on the afternoon of summer solstice
we found ourselves in Dartmoor
among other standing stones—
A trinity of ancient circles where
the mystery remained.

In the lower circle, I stopped
And stood in front of a stone
my own height and remained still
like another stone myself,
part of the mystery, waiting for permission.

Eventually, I touched with tentative
fingertips the roughness of that ancient
stone and sensed in that touch
the drawn-out drumming of Earth's primeval pulse,
slow as the seasons,
silent as the phases of the moon.

What We See in the Dark

Ben Latter

Lord them calves could scream. Their hooves had just enough room to kick back against the old steel gate and snap it closed like a bear trap. Had to keep your fingers clear or losem. But Rebel would just cluck his tongue and say *there there* and set the saw right at the bud and draw like it was nothing. Was to him. They call it docking. The dogs come and snatch the horns and scurry off or get kicked for being underfoot.

Pa manned the iron. Glowing orange and ashy white. He'd set it to the spurting wound and melt the skin shut. My that smell. The soft hairs there catch easy. Have to rub the flames out before it blisters the eyes. If they blister they're gone.

The hardest work fell to him but Rebel just did it. He could find his way to the rear just by touch and he'd flip that old razorlike Old-Timer open and make quick and terrible slashes until the velvet sack fell wet and heavy. White balls sliding out swirling red. Dogs licking drooling lips.

I'd undo the chute and the steer would hobble off shook and disgraced while a gang of the same looked back at us with something like hate. We'd take a breather and Reb would pull an apple from somewhere and with that same damn knife cut me a slice. He'd hold it out and I'd take it and bite. Grimace at the pennies before the tart and sweet.

He was blind by thirty and my grandfather ten years later. Retina something. I don't recall the first time we met. I figure to me he was all bootsteps and shadows at first. Finding his way to my crib drawer and pushing a torn knuckle against my new cheek and humming *mmhm* and nodding congratulations to the room before heading back out and waiting for me to grow. See you then.

He was there when I killed my first snake. Did it the same way he did. Took my belt off and whipped it buckle-first at the pile of coils and then again at the writhing misery. He was there for the first dog I had to shoot. That's why we throw the buckle goddamnit. There for my first black eye and bloodied hand and so my first whisky. There for my first broken heart saying *there twill be nothers.*

And the first time I smoked it was a nabbed Pall Mall from his crushed maroon pack. I lit up just like he did. Drew the match cross my knee and held it sideways with three fingers out. Shook it til blue aurora hung woven in the air. Put it in my mouth for a soft hiss then the ashtray or maybe my pocket but never the ground. Wouldn't dare. Knew better. Coughed at first. Then it was like breath.

They gave me his old flatbed when I was twelve. Had to. Schoolbus wouldn't come that far and I was overdue for school. Seventytwo dually. Rust orange on cracked whitewalls. Pineslat box hung up on not but nails and bailwire. Tweed and tape interior. It smelled like his silver smoke. It smelled like his unbranded white soap. It smelled like his wintergreen chaw. It smelled like his whisky'd up coffee. It smelled like diesel but ran on gas. If it didn't start I'd get out and fuck with the idle or open the throttle valve and maybe spit a mouthful into the float and tryer again. He taught me how. I made it to school when I wanted. Didn't when I didn't.

You go to school today? Pa would ask.

Yessir. Surely did. Knees worn and dark. Cordite burnt sleeves. Socks of sandbur. More in my hair.

I'd catch a skinning for the skipping and another for the lie.

Next time I'd tell true. *Nossir. Went up the hill a spell instead.*

Skinned twice anyway. Bed without dinner.

Swhat you get Reb would say and snicker and give me half

a sandwich. Fer gettin caught.

Reckon the lesson was truth can't be told. Only seen. Say rancher but look round and all we was dirt farmers. Say ranch but it's just dead land. Say cattle but they're thin and sickly and high-hipped and their wide-eyed lows break as they tremble against a plague of flies. Say pretty when rare and heavy rain comes. Pelts the clay and stirs it up in a red haze over greying plains. Bruises the sunset. Falls wet with a color of true earth. Then lakes form in the valleys between the mounds and we all swim. Climb out with little biting worms in our hair. Worms you only see when it rains. They call it a monsoon. For a day things are green. Green to us. Then the desert drinks it in. Slow at first then all at once. The sun comes from Texas and sets in Arizona and for all the in-between brings the horizons closer and turns them to mirrors. The clay dries and curls into peels you can pick up and admire then pretend to eat. I did. I'd come wild and crush them up and rub them on my face and run until I sweat the red back to the ground in as many rivers as we wished we had. Then the wind rises and drives away the petrichor and spins the dust into hunnerd-foot devils that bury the sky. They whip the sand around and it stings. Coats your teeth as you wince. Then the land is dead again. All the colors gone.

The nights are cool and I'd steal them for myself. I'd sneak out and walk into a wild emptiness in any direction. Pull the new Old-Timer out and fiddle with it. Pry up the cinched cap of a hot and shook RC. I'd drink and make the sounds Reb did and whistle the same songs as him and mutter the same wrong words to Old Suzanna. *Do you cry for me?*

Got far enough once to look back and see the nothing I'd set for. Brave it. Rebel would. I closed my eyes and looked through them for the world he saw. Only blotches dark and blue at first. Then I felt the wolftail scratching against my jeans. Golden lines. Heard the riled coyotes squabbling in the distance. White ripples. Smelled the early cottonwood blooms riding the breeze. Purple

calligraphy. But a silence grew and loomed and in it I sensed lurking things watching me. Things like half-molted snakes with their rattles and fangs. Things like fist-sized spiders on pipe-cleaner legs. Things like scorpions covered in stowaway babies and armed with poisonous maces. Red rips. Things like all that darkness. Black. My eyes sprang open and I let out the breath I hadn't meant to hold. Swallowed back the heartbeats. Then the tears. I wasn't him. Could never be him. I could walk slow like him and wear my too-long jeans cuffed to save the hem and I could smoke and drink and hardly cuss and I could smile out of one corner of an always-downturned mouth and still tip my hat at folks and I could force a hoarse laugh at pert-near anything but I couldn't see the light when things went dark. I wasn't Rebel. Couldn't even hold my eyes closed. I stood there trembling. Mad. Afraid. Found my hands were fists. Slugged one into my chest. Closed them again. Saw Pa. Smirking. Beige.

There came a hum. The wet exhaust sputter-stop sound of an old truck under heavy foot. Then came its weak lights. Flickering cones of piss across the soft blue grass. They swept my way just as I dove at the ground. I wasn't supposed to be out. Truck came closer. Belt slipping in a badly-timed whinny. It would have driven over or into me but bit it over an axle-breaker berm and came to a stop in a storm of dust. I heard it run rich then bog down and die. Stayed dead. Bad battery. Alternator. Starter's brush was stripped and it whirred toothless until it just clicked and clicked and there were curses and I heard an old door pop open with a screech and then slam shut with all someone's might and then there was another pop and a latch rattled and the hood screeched and fell heavy and there were curses I'd never heard and then a screech again and then metal scraped as the proprod found the proprod hole.

I fell deeper into the grass. Pushed myself to its roots.

Brenda Lee a man said. *Get on out here.*

Another door popped and slammed and a West-Texas woman spoke irritated. *Whot now?*

Get on back there an turner over the man said.

Got dangit Ed. I coulda jus' scoot.

Same door sounds. Ruined hinges. I waited for the slam. It didn't come.

Fuckin pile a shit. Tinkering. Scratching. Rattling. Tapping. *I'm a kill that Mexican I ever see'm again.* More noise. *Hitter again.*

Only clicks. I let my head come up for a peek. The truck had turned broadside in overcorrection. Old blue and white Ford. The long two-bys you see on the res. Not what I'd pick for a romp across the pasture. The man at the hood was white thin and tall. Wore a shirt fraying at the cut sleeves. Old yellowed hat I imagine had filthy words. I couldn't see his face. He turned and I went down quick and my gasp filled my mouth with dirt. We were a mile from a cow-beat path and ten from any real road. They were alone. I was not.

Hitter again.

It whirred and clicked and groaned and stopped and he cursed and kicked and hit something metal with something metal and then again and again.

The woman spoke. *The hell we gon do Ed?*

Silence.

Ed?

I ain't gon tell you to shut up now. More sounds of bad hands on bad engine. *Got damn* he yelled and kicked the front of the truck and then again and again until he was out of breath. Its poor old springs squeaked as it bounced. *Hand out that bottle.*

I counted the silent moments. Felt the strangers scanning for me. Like hawks on posts do mice.

A squeak. Sounds of liquid. The man yelled a sigh and drank again and then spat and did it again. Whooped. Threw the bottle. I heard the sound of glass leaving grasp and flying. Parted the air over my head. I couldn't duck any further.

Coulda saved me some she said.

My hands and shirt began to cake in the sweat and clay and my jaw began to ache. Long. Dead. Quiet.

Finally. *Dell gon kill us Ed.*

Nothing.

He gon come lookin. He gon find Billy an he gon check that box an

Got damn would you shut up an let me fuckin think?

Fear rode on the air and mixed with mine.

Ed? Her voice trembled. *Whot bout that other? You seen how he did them Waco boys. You seen what he done. They gon do the same ta us they find-*

Brenda Lee you shut that damn mouth rot now. Words shot through grit teeth and trembled more than hers.

I tried to disappear.

Too long for her. *Got damn Ed whot we gon-*

A flurry of steps in the grass. She yelled no and screamed and the door slammed and squeaked open and he yelled things like *I done told you* and cloth slid against cloth and *no no no* and kicks and a thud against the floorplate and then another on the ground. A familiar clap and then again and again until it sounded wet.

He was out of breath. *You don't never fuckin learn.*

She sobbed. Coughed. Murmured *sorry* through a mouthful of blood.

Pain deep in my gut. Frozen teeth aching from the clench. Every rock and goathead driving into my skin.

He kicked at the bumper again. Pounded on something with his fist and spat. Spat again. Something clanked around.

Tryer now.

A moment passed.

I got to come over there and haul you to it?

Grass cracking in slow and timid steps. Door popped. Squeaked. Ignition whirred and clicked and groaned. Then a loud pop. We all jumped. Sparks flew into the air like yellow stars then

fell in slow arcs around him. He swept at his shoulders.

He grunted. *Again.*

Life in the turnover. It whined and coughed but the old blue and white finally came up. Then fell to a sickly idle.

Hot damn whot I tell you? Scoot he said. The door popped and squeaked and slammed. The lights weakened as he set it in gear. They lit me up. I pushed myself deep into the ground. Wished I could reach hell. Just be flat. Don't panic. Thattaboy. The truck was on me. Turned east in the nick. Dust rose and melted in my mouth and stopped my lungs but kept me hidden as they passed. Exhaust and whisky and something I'd never know flavored the air.

I rolled over and caught breath. Waited long as I could. Sat up slow and looked for the taillights but saw none. They were gone. I tried to breathe. Let my shaking hands slide about me to make sure I was still there. Undid the fake-pearl snap and brought out a damp and crooked Pall Mall. Fumbled for a match and felt one and went to draw it but something behind me cracked. I froze worried I'd only imagined the truck leaving. I turned slowly. Dropped the unlit cigarette. Then the unlit match. My face felt warm and then suddenly hot. The ground was red and orange flowers then flags then sheets then sails. I coughed at the sour smoke and drew up an arm and pushed myself to my feet. Couldn't move. As a child I had imagined a dragon. And now it had come. The wind unfurling its wings.

Behind me the darkness beckoned. Broke the trance. I ran and tripped and somehow stood to run again and got to the first barbwire fence and caught my old shirt and heard it rip and felt the blood warm and thick trickle down my back. Somewhere I lost my hat. I was full speed by the second fence and cleared it easier. Turned back to see all the world burning and gaining in chase.

The house sat dark and poor and small and precious. All I loved and hated sealed up inside and sleeping. I swung the door open and my voice was lost in a new fear but I caught breath and

yelled. *Fire! Fire!* Pa came out and his robe hung open and his underwear was dyed pink from a missed sock. For some reason he grabbed the thirtythirty parked in the corner by the door. His hair was bent and yellow and sparse. Like the grass before it burned. Ma hollered. I couldn't make it out. Sister cried mama from somewhere else. She was that age.

Pa looked at me. Read my face. *God damn what you do?*

I had no voice. No words. I pointed somewhere.

He grabbed my shirt and pulled me to him then against the wall. I felt his hand across my face. It cooled. His breath hit harder. *I say what you do?*

No truth had ever saved me. So none came.

He threw another clap and I bit my tongue.

Pennies. Apples.

You was out there smokin wudn't you?

I waited for him to do whatever he was going to do.

Clay? Ma said. She was looking past us to the window and put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes shook and something bright danced in them.

Pa followed her hand as it came up and pointed and he saw. The sun was rising in the north. *Sweet Jesus.* His hand and I fell.

***

We moved into Rebel's old camper. Fire hadn't caught the backside of the hill. Just ours. We lost the house and two barns. Every horse and nearly every head. I like to think the dogs made it. I went looking for things I could save but found none. Piles of ash. Embers you could snuff with spit. Some took piss. Wood beams still hot to the touch. Something I couldn't make out was caked with soot so I drew my name in it. Then I smeared it away.

I tried a few times to say what happened. *Don't you dare*

their eyes said. So I didn't.

Rebel came and told me to drive him to town. I obliged. We drove easy over the paths and then onto the road. I looked over at him. Saw he was facing the black hillside as though he could see it. Watching it pass in memory. Trying to alter it with a conjured fire. The acrid air helped.

You really start that fahr? He asked.

I cleared my throat. *Reckon so.*

Yer Pa says so.

Well he oughta know.

Stop the truck.

Do what?

Go on now. Right here.

I stopped. Dust rolled in around us. No, it was ash.

He turned to me. *Tell me true now. You start that fahr?*

I looked back at him. His eyes clouds of steel. His face a mess of leather. I opened my mouth. Felt my cheeks burn and my eyes itch. My breath broke and stuttered. Hot tears ran down my dirty cheeks and landed black in my lap. No words came.

Rebel reached over and grabbed my shoulder. The back of my neck. *Didn't think so* he said and gave me a handkerchief.

He pulled two smokes out of his front pocket. Handed one to me. We lit.

The matches hissed in our mouths. Then we put them in our pockets.

It didn't matter that there was nothing left to burn.

Samsara I

Lex C. Brenner

Run

Sam Roy

Run little Black boy, run.
To be on the team, you've got to work twice as hard.
Chew up the competition and spit out the bar.
This is your only real door to being a star.
You have to run little Black boy. Run

Run little Black boy, run.
Your crush is chasing, but you mustn't give way
Her playful shriek is your favorite song, but
You don't need lavender germs from the cute girl today.
Run quick little Black boy, run.

Run little Black boy, run.
Hitting your brother will get you the belt again.
The wrinkled cowhide on your backside
Leaves welts of love even though it feels like sin.
You gotta run little Black boy, run.

Run young Black boy, run.
You don't need to fight; it's not who you are anymore.
You can prove yourself otherwise, just get in your car.
The last place your masculinity needs to be seen
Is on Worldstar.
So, run young Black boy, run.

Run young Black man, run.
Not for you, but for your platoon.
You swore this troop he'd come home soon.

So don't let him become the sand you shake
Out of your boots later.
You need to run, young Black man, run.

Don't run young Black man, whatever you do.
You don't want any trouble, you're only passing through.
Your legs must be tired but you gotta
Raise your hands up high.
So stop running, young Black man. This can't be your last night alive.

Untitled

James Watkins

The constellations
Are captured
And released in our

Little hands

— Streaking across one
Open palm
Is a shooting star

Water, and Concrete and Steel

Charles H. M. Brown

In the early morning, a man stops his walk to regard the dark clouds that rest atop an even darker ocean. The clouds roll about the horizon in a panic, as though they were trying to hide something; the man can see the burning red sky despite their best efforts.

The man's father lectures in his mind, "Remember Charlie, 'red sky at night, sailor's delight,' but 'red sky in morning, sailors take warning.' Don't forget that, boy."

Charlie continues walking down the destitute sidewalk, weaving his path around the unending puddles of brown murk, focusing on his feet rather than his father. His trek ends when he reaches an old building made of bricks, the same hue as the burning sky behind them. This is the building Charlie was looking for. It sits directly on the water, framed by the padded steel ship ramps to either side. Charlie slowly pans his sight from one side of the two-story structure to the other as he scrutinizes each brick and each pockmark in the mortar that binds them. His eyes find the missing chunk of brick on the north-west corner; Charlie thought it looked as though a sea monster had leapt from the water to taste the old building. He knew, however, that it had not been a sea monster. It was a boat trailer maneuvered by his father, who had unsurprisingly reeked of *Black Friars Gin*.

"It's the stuff your granddad drunk in the Royal Navy, y'know," his father regaled after the accident.

A wind bites at Charlie's cheeks to remind him why he came; he catches his mind straying more often than before.

A smell of salt stings his nose. Salt and rot.

Charlie dislikes the wharf. Such places always remind him

of his father, though he wished it were otherwise. A moment later, Charlie considers:

It's not the wharf. It's the sea.

Charlie sucks once at his teeth, wishing he'd focus. Tucking his hands into the pockets of his overcoat, he strides towards the old brick building.

As he turns the wrought iron knob and passes through the oak portal, he thinks again of his father.

"And you?! You'll be swallowed by concrete! Concrete and steel."

Charlie could still feel the venom his father spat as he recalled the last word. At the time, Charlie only felt the sting in his ears, but that venom has since oozed through his soul like an oil spill, polluting the memories of the man who had raised him. It was the last word his father ever said to him. His father was lost at sea, no trace of any kind. That fact gnaws at the back of Charlie's brain like the sea monster that ate the old brick building.

Nothing sits within the walls of the structure; there is only the structure itself. There aren't even interior walls to divide the first floor into rooms; opposite from where Charlie stands, there is no wall, just open ocean and the blazing sky. The only thing still within the walls is a spiral staircase. There are small circles all over where the wood floor is lighter; they show the places where tables would have been. Charlie remembered watching his father butcher an 853-pound bluefin on one such table. The oak boards had creaked like a forest in a thunderstorm when the tuna was lowered off the hoist. Charlie shakes out of the memory, unsettled by his sudden sentimentality. He makes himself look back to the staircase.

The staircase is made of the same wrought iron as the door knob, and it spirals upward from the direct center of the room. It leads to answers, Charlie thinks. Some faint sensation in his stomach, like an ebbing tide, knows that this is not the case. The tide in Charlie's stomach tells him to leave, but his muscles stiffen

and drag him up the stairs. He reaches into his coat and under his arm to find some small comfort. The snub-nose revolver his father once used to shoot at a fish that snapped the line. The mother of pearl grip is cool under Charlie's touch. Knowing the pistol is there calms him, even though he's always hated guns.

"Can't trust nobody or nothin'!" his father once slurred through swigs of gin. "And I keep it loaded, in case ol' Neptune thinks of taking me. Call it... *my own terms*."

Charlie takes his hand from the pearl as he crests the second floor.

There's nothing there. The second floor matches the first almost perfectly, save a single window facing west, towards a city that seems to expand endlessly. It's a sea of concrete and steel. Charlie's father had hated it.

"I ain't leavin' this place, Charlie... and neither should you. No sir, I ain't leaving the water that raised me."

"Very poetic, Dad, but I don't think the 'water' gives as much a shit about you as you do for it. But stay here then! Let it kill you. One day it'll just... swallow you up. Drunk bastard."

Charlie squats down, balancing on his toes. He rests his elbows on his knees, cupping his face in his hands as he replays the last words he said to his father.

Charlie strains to remember why he came to this place. The building he was practically raised in suddenly seems alien, and the empty walls and barren floor glower at Charlie.

I told him, didn't I?

Charlie knows it is not the time for those thoughts.

He was as stubborn as the current that dragged him under.

Charlie wonders if this old brick building was placed there for *him*, if it was ever actually his father's seafood warehouse. Maybe it was designed to torment him, to tantalize him with some resolution.

Bait on a hook.

Charlie rises to his feet and breathes deeply through his nose before turning to face the iron staircase.

Somehow, it continues up.

At first, Charlie assumes it would go to the roof.

No light comes from the space above.

Were there two stories or three?

He does not think long before he rushes back to the staircase; he climbs once more, now rising two steps at a time. The tide in his gut floods his doubt and powers his legs like hydraulic pistons. Over the raging water comes the small cry of gull, the thought in the back of Charlie's mind.

I'd never even been to the second floor. He never let me.

The third room is much smaller, but it is as empty as its predecessors. And like the room before, there is one window. But this one faces east.

It faces the sea.

Charlie approaches the glass.

The water roils below him, a great blue violence as far as he can see. There's a hostility in those waves, a presence focused on him alone. The distant sound of crashing foam dares him to find his father, to go out and find what became of that old sailor.

The sky is on fire, the clouds no longer able to hide it. The tumbling gray mass is a small pupil within a bloodshot iris. The great eye stares at every cell in Charlie's body with the callousness and shame his father had when Charlie announced he was leaving this place. Fish hooks in Charlie's eyelids prevent them from closing, and he can't help but stare back at the giant bloodshot eye of a drunkard.

'...sailors take warning.'

Charlie covers his ears and pulls his head away from the transfixing gaze; he backs away from the window and towards the staircase. He feels dizzy as he tries to recall what brought him to this place.

The staircase brought me to this place.

The mocking sass in Charlie's mind forces him to chuckle, though it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

Somehow, the staircase continues up.

Why am I here?

Charlie begins to climb again, trying and failing to dam the crashing waves that rise up from his stomach to his head. If Charlie were to remember that the old brick building is only two stories tall, he might stop climbing the iron staircase. But he's forgotten. So he continues to climb.

Like a fish on the line.

Charlie comes into the fourth room. The taunting foam below is now too far for Charlie to hear. There are no sounds at all. There are no windows for the eye to peer through. There is no staircase.

The room appears a perfect cube, perhaps seven feet in any dimension. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, gently flickering. Under the bulb is a chair remarkably similar to one in Charlie's apartment back in the city.

The room is made of concrete and the walls are cracked and fissured, displaying the metal bones laced within.

Fitting.

Charlie can't sense the waves within or without. His muscles are wound like the cables suspending a bridge, but they've snapped, letting the bridge sink into the water.

Charlie sags and collapses into the chair that looks like his own.

He reaches into his coat and under his arm to find some small comfort.

Lure

Molly Howard

Trumor

Jennifer Lynn Browning

Nov. 3, 1944
Hello baby girl,

I sure wish I was home curled up with your arms held tight around me. I swear if I close my eyes I can feel them and can smell the rose of your shampoo and the onions from last night's roast. Homey smells and textures, that's what we miss out here. Here it's all mud and green and wet mixed with sweat and piss and that peculiar smell that old trees give off in the fall. You know the one I mean, like the smell of old Pisgah just before winter sets in.

Time seems to be draining from the clock. We move out tomorrow. I can't tell you the name, of course, because the censors watch out for things like that. Not that I could pronounce it anyway. But, I can tell you it's old and dark like some upside down version of the fairy tales you read to our boy. God, I'd love to be there now to kiss his little tow-head. The younger boys were trying to chase away their jitters this evening while we settled. One of them pulled out a harmonica and another a set of spoons he'd lifted from somewhere. They soon had us all tapping away for a little bit, but soon, too soon, the sounds started to drop out, first one clap, then a stomp, one at a time until only the harmonica was left and its sound died as it muffled into the trees. It sounded like the mournful call at the end of one of those stories.

I can't sleep. We're all of us leaned half against our packs and half against the walls seeping with yesterday's rain. It's cold as hell and oh so wet. We put down our parkas, but there's only so much they can do. The baby-faced lieutenant has been through here a couple of times, telling us to settle in, get some sleep while we can.

He's so young. You'd say he was cute, I'm sure. He's 20, just out of two years of college. He's got that look of a boy glossed over with the muscles of a newly forming man. I don't know if anyone else has noticed, but I see the terror in his eyes. It makes me nervous for tomorrow.

Most these boys are much younger than I am. They call me grandpa. They're good fellas but so green. I doubt most of them had even seen a gun, much less shot one, before we started our training. City boys. They say the fellas we're replacing had a lot more training than we did. I believe it. These poor boys really have no idea what they're doing. Our training was so short, done by men who themselves were just out of training. Makes me kind of wonder how successful they think we're really going to be.

The moon is so bright tonight. I'm writing by its light. It's funny. There aren't any sounds of frogs or birds or crickets. All I hear is the snores and snuffles, the occasional grunts, and even a few hastily muffled tears of the men around me. We're all restless I think.

I know I probably shouldn't even be telling you about all these doubts and my sense of unease, but you made me promise to share everything so I am. Plus, it makes me feel closer to you having this one sided conversation. I don't know when I may have a chance to mail this. They tell us that it can sometimes take a while out here in the lines of battle. I'm hoping, though, that I can send it soon. Til then, I'm going to stow it in my jacket and I'll just keep adding to it until there's someone can mail it for me.

Well, sweetheart, I'm going to close for now. I've gotta get some sort of sleep before we march tomorrow. Know I'm going to be dreaming of you and our boy and wishing that I'm there with you soon.

November 4, 1944

Hey baby,

Sam and I are hiding out in an old church we found. You remember I told you about Sam? He's from Marion, just down the mountain from us. He and I have been pals since we were in bootcamp and we were lucky enough to get posted together. He's a few years younger than me, but seasoned for all that. He tells me he's been hunting and tracking since he was a young boy, following his dad and older brothers sometimes all the way over the Old Fort.

Anyways, Sam and me and the lieutenant got separated from our unit. The lieutenant, he's not talking, just sits and stares off in to the distance with this look of sheer horror on his face. Sam and me, we had to drag him away from the fighting when things went south.

I guess I should really start at the beginning, though, shouldn't I?

They woke us up before dawn. We had our rations, cold, and then got in our lines. There was a drizzling rain, the kind that seeps in every which way, and the wind had picked up so all of us were feeling pretty miserable. The lieutenant came down the rows telling us he'd heard from his commander. Our job was to take the forest that stands between where we were and the objective which is a little town on the other side. The lieutenant said the town was of great strategic importance and we were to capture it no matter the cost. His voice went up when he said that.

Now, marching up to that forest, it didn't look all that imposing from a distance. You'd have loved seeing those stately old trees saluting the sky, row after row after row of them. It looked like someone had set them out on purpose-like so that they looked all precise and regimented. As we got closer, though, we could see the forest floor and the bottom of those trees. Most of the tree trunks weren't brown anymore; they was yellow, the trees' innards on display because of all the bullets that had chewed into

the flesh of them. And, the smell. We knew there'd already been a battle or two in this forest, but nothing prepares you for the smell. The rotting bodies, the sulfur, the charred and burned smell, the creosote, all of it one big stew of rank and rancid. Some of the boys in my group started retching and out-an-out throwing up. The lieutenant's eyes just kept getting bigger and more full of fear. I tried to convince myself it wasn't any worse than after deer hunting when we'd prep the carcasses. It helped a little, but not much.

That's when the krauts started coming out at us from the trees. They'd been hidden amongst the debris and when we got in range, they started plowing us down. The first line of boys had no warning before the guns started blasting. 20, 50, 75 dead. Just dead. A minute before they'd been bravely getting ready to do their duty and then ... nothing. I can't even find the words, honey. Some of them were just babies. Real babies. The lieutenant didn't know what to do. The men were trying to seek cover and was looking at him for direction, but he just stood there, his mouth wide open but no sounds coming out.

The sergeant took over and shouted to us to find cover and return fire. But, there wasn't any cover. None, except for the corpses of the men who'd already been gunned down. Sam and me, we dropped to our bellies and used the chest and legs of our friend Jim as cover. I propped my gun up on his belly and shot away. I think I maybe took out two or three of them. I don't know. But, then the sergeant... well... he was there, and then, he wasn't anymore. I don't know what they hit him with, but all that was left were his two legs. They even stood there upright for a second or two as if they had been taken by surprise. The men panicked and starting running every which way. And, the lieutenant just stood there, mouth open, and his eyes... I wish I could un-see the expression in his eyes. Sam and me looked at each other and I could see he was thinking the same thing I was. He set off a round from his gun while I grabbed ahold of the lieutenant. Shooting as we

went, we scuttled sideways to the battle and tried to find cover. I don't know how the three of us managed it, but none of us got hit and we ran, pulling the lieutenant along with us until the sounds kind of slacked off.

Because we'd gone slantwise, we ended up in the trees and found some shelter in a hollow log for a little bit, just enough to catch our breath and make sure we hadn't any of us been shot. We could hear the gunfire moving off to the side of us, seeming to be moving away.

We knew there was no way to get back to our lines from where we were, so we took off still going through the trees. Our plan is to head back the way we think our lines are by going at an angle. We've got a direction from the sun, and Sam thinks he can get us there. So, we've just kept walking and watching out for the enemy. We haven't seen any, but we could still hear the gunfire.

Along around mid-afternoon, we found an abandoned, bombed out church. Since we've basically been half-dragging, half-carrying the lieutenant the whole way, Sam and I decided we needed to take a small rest before we continue on, so we've hidden ourselves in a corner of the fallen building. I'm taking first watch. Sam's asleep, or trying to be, and the lieutenant is sitting staring off into space. He hasn't spoken a word since the battlefield.

There's just enough light coming in from the breaks in the building that I can see to write by. I honestly don't know how Sam and I got out of there unharmed. I guess God had a plan for us to save the lieutenant is all I can figure. That and he gave both Sam and me the mountain man's resourcefulness.

Now that things are quiet, I can't quite get my hands to stop shaking. I write a few words and then I have stop and let them tremble for a bit. It'll be a wonder if you can read my writing even it if gets to you.

I've never been so scared, baby. I'd never tell nobody but you, but I just... I just thought my life was over. And, all I saw was

your sweet face. All the filth and death around me and it was your beautiful, smiling face that I saw in my mind's eye. You holding our son up to say goodbye as I boarded the train. God, baby, I miss you sometimes so much that I feel like my limbs are just going to come off my body from the sheer loving you.

I'm sorry to write about such horrible things. I guess it's just my way of holding onto the good and reminding myself of why I'm doing this. If I'm writing to you, I can remember there's beauty and love and all those things that the songs talk about.

I love you. So much. I just hope...

November 6, 1944
Dear Mrs. B,

This is Sam. J.T. wrote you about me, I know.

I promised him that if I got out, I'd send you his letter and tell you want happened to him. I don't feel exactly right about that second part, but I promised, and I don't like to go back on my word no matter how difficult the thing may be to do.

The blood you see above is your husband's. I'm sorry to tell you, ma'am, but he's dead. He died saving my life. I'm sorry to be so blunt about it. I just don't know how else to say it.

I took the liberty of reading the rest of J.T's letter to you. I hope you'll forgive me for that, but I wasn't sure exactly what he might have told you about our situation.

As he was telling you, after we escaped the morning's slaughter, we took refuge in a bombed out church. We was only waiting for the sun to set then we was going to use the darkness to make our way back to our lines. J.T. volunteered to take the first watch, so I was over in the corner trying to sleep. I guess I must have drifted off at some point, because the next thing I knew I was being jerked awake by the lieutenant screaming. He didn't seem to be making no words, just screaming. J.T. was trying to get him to be quiet, holding him by the collar and shaking him, but the

lieutenant was trying to fight J.T. off and just screaming at the top of his lungs. Then, there was a single pop and the lieutenant was dead. His blood was all over J.T.'s face.

I guessed the Germans had been passing by the ruin on their way back to somewhere. The lieutenant's scream brought them running. I don't think they could see anyone but the lieutenant, but they saw enough they was able to hit him straight on. J.T. jumped back and let go of what was left of the lieutenant's body, and he and I scrambled to find a way out. The whole time, through the lieutenant screaming, through the blood, and everything, I saw that J.T. had some paper in his hand. I saw him quickly shove it into his back pocket as he scrambled.

We'd decided this church was a good hidey hole because it had multiple ways out. So, we started crawling our way toward one of the holes. The Germans' bullets kept singing over our heads so we tried to stay low to the ground. I was in back with J.T. just ahead of me. We'd made it to the exit when suddenly in front of J.T. appeared this big, blonde German. I swear he was a good foot or so taller than poor, stubby-legged J.T. But, J.T., he just puffed up, and yelling blood murder, he charged the guy. I guess he realized he didn't have any ammunition left or something cause he didn't even try to use his gun. He just leapt at the guy. J.T. tore the rifle out of the soldier's hands and everything. While he was wrestling with the guy over the gun, he yelled at me to go on past him. So, I did.

It all happened so fast. I so wish I hadn't gone past him. Another kraut came out of the dark. J.T. swung the confiscated rifle around and shot him before he could shoot me, but the first soldier had one of those officer daggers. He pulled it out while J.T. was aiming and he stabbed J.T. with it. I shot him and he went down. Turned out it was only the two of them. I ran back to J.T. and pulled him out from under the second German's body. He was bleeding everywhere.

Ma'am, I held him while he died. I tried to move him, but

J.T. whispered to me that it wasn't going to do no good. It was too late. I know he was right, but I didn't want him to be. He struggled, reaching back to his back pocket and dug those papers out then handed them to me. They were this letter, and he made me promise to see that you got it and that I would tell you what happened. Then, I sat there and I held him. I couldn't see him because of the tears in my eyes, but I felt the shudders his body made as he breathed. He looked up at me and said to tell you that he loved you. Then, he shut his eyes and the shuddering stopped.

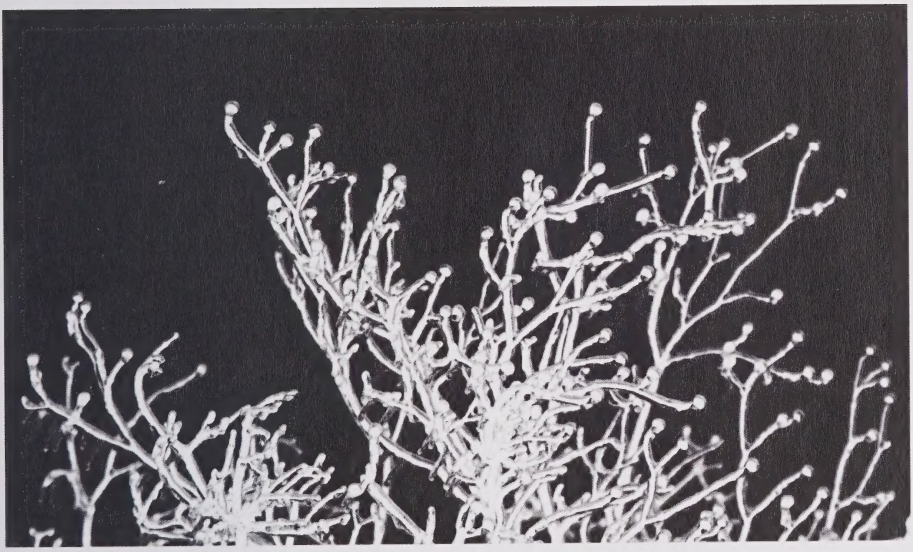
I had to leave him there. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I had no choice. Turns out we weren't even that far from our guys. I've made arrangements with one of the officers to go back out there, though, and get him and the lieutenant tomorrow. I also found someone who's leaving to go stateside in a couple of days. He's going to send this letter to you when he gets home. He's going to try to send it to you without the censors seeing it so that you can read everything.

Ma'am, your husband was a hero. I doubt that will bring you much comfort right now, but I hope that it will sometime in the future. Your husband was my best friend over here, and I will grieve his passing every day for the rest of my life no matter how long or short that may be. God bless you and your little boy.

-Sam Tinsley

A History in Ice

Joanna Guy



Epiphany

Beverly Williamson

I had surgery in 2018 for the first time. Just my shoulder. The surgery—the cutting, fixing, sewing up—doesn't bother me. But I'm scared of the anesthesia. Stories about patients not waking or waking up demented or crippled. Awful. Also, the idea that I'm unconscious in a room full of strangers freaks me out no matter how many medical degrees they cumulatively have. Weird. Frightening. Unsettling.

But I did it.

I said a couple of funny things after the fabulous sedative started to kick in. (I mean, it's good. Don't let anybody kid you.) I remember being wheeled into the surgery room saying, "This is just like TV, you know? Like a TV show. Just like TV." I was in awe. Nobody ever said that before. There may have been slight rolling of the eyes as the gowned, gloved, and masked health care professionals thought, "How original."

So there I am, and the anesthesiologist assistant's gentle hand is coming toward me with the plastic mask that goes over nose and mouth so you can go to sleepy town, when something searing clear, sunlight sharp, and crystal urgent comes to my mind. I would have grabbed her arm if I could have. The panic. The desperation came from the primal, caveman, O Great Mother part of my gut and forced out the following words, audible in the otherwise quietly busy room:

"Wait, I have a son."

***

Mothers think of their children first. And last. Before themselves.

Before anyone or anything else.

They do.

It is a fact.

Like the moon.

***

I am afraid to die. Believe me. The thought scares the shit out of me. Despite my vague, on and off general beliefs in a divine being and an afterlife of peace and harmony and no longer worrying about exercising, I DO NOT want to actually, you know, kick it. Bite it. Go on to that last round-up in the sky. No sir. I'm breaking out in a sweat just typing this.

Many of my fears – and joys – have changed shape and color and depth because I'm a mother. Laughter is more fun. Danger is more present.

***

I spent a couple of days after my successful surgery in bed enjoying a fabulous prescription. (I'm not kidding. What a pill!) I thought quite a bit about what I had said to the mint-green-masked lady before I went out like a light, and I realized those words were a summary of what I wanted to explain.

Please. I have to live. I have to. I have a son and I have to live. I'm not a great mother, but promise me. Think of him. Please. I have to live. I have to live.

Nothing like thinking you might really Meet a Maker, right?

***

Honestly, my son doesn't need me now. He'll be fourteen in two months. He's taller, stronger, and, in a lot of ways, smarter than I am. He's healthy, good, and kind.

After all, Tarzan and Mowgli made it just fine. And honestly, I think growing up in the jungle with primate parents, eating fruit all day, playing and napping sounds great. I would have loved that!

***

But I don't want him to grow up in the jungle without me.
There are traps.
There is evil.
There is poison and danger.
There is the betrayal of false friends and heartaches.
There is shame and confusion.
There is fear and darkness.

He'll manage it all just fine one day.
But not yet.
There are many years when he won't need me.
But he needs me to be.

(Don't!) Smile

Zainab Sayed

Even though nobody really liked Age Kiyazaki, he was still invited to the gathering of the officially commended Alveron High School juniors at the end of the semester. People didn't like him, but that didn't mean that there wasn't anything to be liked; he was smart, and witty, and spoke and moved with a transcendental gentleness that no one could quite describe. He was kind when he meant to be, and helped people when they really needed help. But he wouldn't help someone just because they asked, and he never instigated conversation, and he never opened up to let anyone be his friend.

His name wasn't actually Age. It was Eiji (Eiji? No, Eiji. Eiji? Still wrong.), but since no one seemed to ever pronounce his name right, he was quickly renamed Age. Though he transferred at the end of sophomore year, people still picked up on his presence quickly. People talked to (at) him a lot, and tried to bully him, but no one ever really got through. The one time anyone tried to get physical (it started quite civil; he was politely asked to go to the gym supply room and he politely accepted), the attackers escorted him back to the classroom and offered a public apology and commendation for his character.

It was just too shady. No one tried to beat him up ever again.

So, when the event organizers convened to plan the gathering, they decided it best to at least invite him. It wasn't as though he was social, and it was a social event, so he probably wouldn't even come, right?

Just in case, an extra seat and gift bag were prepared. Eiji did, in fact, come to the event. It was fairly small, composed of

only twenty or so of the juniors best in behavior and academics. All the same, he spent the first half of the event in the darkest corner (which was still bright, why were these things always so brightly lit?) with a cup of juice that never emptied, trying his hardest to be ignored, and succeeding for the most part. Aria LeRouge tried to strike up a friendly conversation, but after he (physically) cringed at her attempt, she decided it best to leave him alone.

The second half of the event was meant for "bonding." This meant games (and if Age didn't want to be a part of it, it would be rude to insist, right?), gift exchanging (and if Age hadn't bought a gift, there were odd numbers anyway, so it would be fine, right?), and storytelling.

Ghost-story-telling.

When he heard this, Eiji's pale, quiet face gained some color, and spread into a wide, delighted smile.

"...and that, the stories say, is the sound that students hear when the lights go out at the end of the day. The end."

Half of the circle shifted uncomfortably and tugged their jackets closer and scooted closer to their friends, while the other half snickered and threw elbows into sides and exchanged knowing smiles.

"Wow! That was really great." Kevin Morace, director of event activities, clapped his hands and smiled. "So, going to your left... Age? Do you have a story?"

All eyes immediately turned to the quiet boy. "Hmm." He looked down at his lap, brow furrowed. He had been slightly disappointed when he heard they were only telling ghost stories about the school, but had quickly brightened up again. "Yes. I have one."

Everyone leaned forward, each feeling the rush of anticipation. He was such a (creepy) quiet person, and he was so pale and mysterious—in short, the perfect type to have a really

scary ghost story. Not some spooky play on the sounds the boiler room made after hours. A *real* ghost story.

Eiji took a breath. "It was a dark and stormy night..."

Everyone slouched back down, restraining moans (what did we expect?) and disappointed sighs (here comes another one.)

He grinned, honest and open and amused. "Just kidding. This is the story of Claire Risean."

Eyes widened (wasn't she...?) and breaths caught (how did he know...?) as he shifted, tucking his legs underneath him, settling in to tell his story.

"Claire was a quiet girl. She was slight, and dark-haired and pale-eyed. She had glasses, and she needed them to see, but she never wore them because her bullies always broke them when they caught up to her.

"That's right, bullies. Claire was bullied all the time, and quite horribly. She was beaten and hurt and left alone to fix herself. She never quite did, but she tried all the same. She wore long sleeves to hide the marks during the summer, and people thought her all the stranger for it. She kept her head down and didn't answer other's questions about it. She never spoke to anyone, afraid that it would just get worse if she did." He paused, then waved a hand slightly. "That's just a bit of background. This is the story of one particular day in the life of Claire."

***

On August eighteenth, two years ago, Claire woke up in the morning to go through her daily routines. She showered and dressed, brushed her teeth and hair, and spent a few minutes pondering over what to do with her hair. She finally decided to tie it up and braid the small lock that always fell loose. It was hard to do, since her fingers were stiff with the pain of being shut in a door three days prior. She did it all the same, since it was the gathering of the freshman honors students, and she was hoping to make friends for her sophomore year.

She hadn't had a single friend before. She was too afraid to approach anyone, and everyone was too wary to approach her. Today, though, she would be brave. Just one day. Just one hour would be enough, she decided. Just one person.

Claire was careful with what she chose to wear; most of her clothes were dark and stiff, but today she dug out an old green sundress. It was bright, bright enough to make her eyes hurt. It was patterned with small blue summer flowers, and she was sure that it was the nicest piece of clothing she owned. Perfect for making-a-friend day. Underneath she wore a white shirt with long sleeves; she had hoped to have no marks this week, but it couldn't be avoided. She convinced herself that she looked nice all the same. She looked into the mirror and said aloud, "I look nice today." She ground her teeth. It sounded like a lie. There was nothing nice about her. Her eyes wandered to the ground, but she forced them back to the mirror. "You look nice." Well. It was a bit better, at least.

Claire checked the clock. Seven thirty. The gathering was at one. If she left now, she could get to the library right at opening time, and wait there until it was twelve thirty, then walk to the meeting place. She nodded to herself. That would work. She could make it work. She grabbed her bag, which contained a water bottle and some snacks, as well as a change of clothes and a hairbrush. Then, as quietly as possible, she slipped out of her room, and descended the stairs. She stopped on the last step, and listened for a moment. Hearing nothing, she tucked her feet into her shoes and made her way to the door.

"What are you doing?"

She stopped. It wasn't a freeze, a surprised jerk into inertness, the stiff snapshot of a person caught at something; it was a casual stop, as if she had stopped to look at something in a store window; as if she wasn't expecting to be stopped, but there wasn't anything particularly unusual about it. She thought about replying. 'I have to do something for school,' or something like

that. But it was summer, and if she mentioned school she would definitely be called a liar, regardless of the truth. She could say, 'I'm going to the library,' but then she wouldn't be allowed through the door. She repressed a sigh. She would have to wait it out, then depart quickly in the aftermath.

"I said," a strong hand gripped her shoulder, curling into the hollow of collarbone, "what are you doing?"

Claire was turned around roughly, and she struggled not to resist. Stiffness would only make things more difficult.

"Were you going to leave me?" The snarled demand was accompanied by a rough shake. "Did you think you were going to leave me?"

Her shoulder was released, and Claire quickly unclenched her jaw. The blow came quicker than usual, designed for speed more than force. It knocked her to the ground anyway, and she gasped as the door handle snagged her back. There was no breath in her when the foot connected with her hip, and she made no sound.

Closing her eyes, she began to recite mentally, *I was angry with my friend; I told my wrath, my wrath did end. I was angry with my foe; I told it not, my wrath will grow.*

It never lasted longer than it took to recite. Not if it was recited as it should. And I watered it in fears, night and morning with my tears; and I sunned it with smiles...

It was over. There was a growl, and a mutter of 'stupid headache,' and the scraping footsteps of someone who doesn't want to pull their full weight. She opened her eyes. She didn't try to open just one, or to peek. She opened them fully and, seeing no one there, pulled herself up to sitting. Her eyes wandered over to the mirror on the wall. Tears welled up in her eyes.

The dress was torn down the shoulder. Blood from her temple had matted the braid, and there were bruises on the side of her neck. One finger had begun to swell again. She pushed herself to standing, and stood for a moment, swaying slightly. Then she

turned, opened the door, and left.

It was time for her second daily routine.

Clean the cuts first. Wrap them up. Wash the blood from her hair, quickly, before it dried and clumped into an incorrigible mess. Brush it again. Change clothes. She looked at the mirror. Frowning, she untied her hair, letting it fall loose and sickly about her shoulders. The bruises were covered. She examined herself for a moment. Nothing was visible, but the clothes were drab, a dark green shirt under a black jacket and a pair of brown corduroys. She winced. She hadn't been very careful the last time she packed.

She left the gas station bathroom and walked slowly to the library. Once she arrived, she glanced at the clock above the librarian's desk. Eight twenty.

After browsing the shelves for a few minutes, Claire selected a tall book on myths and traditions. She settled on a small burgundy couch and opened the book.

"Claire?"

She looked up. The librarian (*It's Ms. Heikjwore. Heikjwore? No, Heikjwore. Heikjwore? You can call me Agatha, dear.*) was looking at her, a smile on her lips but a furrow in her brow. She suspects, Claire thought, trying not to curl up. I have to be careful around her. "Yes, Miss Agatha?"

"Well..." she shifted, shuffling the books in her arms to be better supported. "Sweetheart, you just look so down. Is everything all right?"

Claire nodded mutely.

Miss Agatha's worried smile pinched slightly, as if she wanted to frown. "Well. You can talk to me about anything, okay? And I'm sure that whatever is wrong will work out."

"Nothing's wrong," Claire replied quietly.

Miss Agatha stood quietly for a moment, her lips dropping, then quickly offered a small smile. "All right, dear. Put on a smile, sweet. Everything will fall into place eventually."

She turned and left.

Claire sat, watching the tall woman leave, waiting for her to be out of sight before looking back to the book. It only took a few seconds of flipping through the book's pages for Claire to find something that caught her interest. Her fingers touched the words at the top of the page.

One Thousand Paper Cranes.

"I'll do it," she whispered to someone far, far away. Then, to herself, I'll start as soon as I get home after the event today. I'll make a thousand paper cranes. Again, to the person, "Anything to make you better."

Standing in the corner of the event, Claire rediscovered that making a resolution to do something is very, very different from actually doing it. People milled about, only twenty or so, mostly staying in groups with those they knew but branching out to introduce themselves to others. Claire curled her hands a few times, her fingers throbbing. Just one person.

"Would you like some juice?"

Claire looked up in surprise at the man who spoke. He was old, old in the way that almost anyone could look at him and simply feel young. His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and he held out a plastic cup. Claire took the cup, shyly muttering something gratuitous. The man tucked his hand into his pocket, then addressed her again. "Are you going to hide here the whole time?"

She looked at him with confusion, as though she didn't know exactly what he was asking about.

"Come now. I've worked here for forty-six years. I've seen all sorts of events, and all sorts of quiet folk. It only takes one word. People love to talk. Just go to someone, anyone, and say hi. They'll pull you into talking about themselves quicker than you can introduce yourself."

Seeing the stricken look on her face, he added softly, "And

try for a smile. It'll do wonders."

In the next moment, he was gone.

Hand weakly gripping the cup of juice, she took a tentative step forward. She inwardly scolded herself for her cowardice. She approached the nearest cluster of people, four girls and a boy, and said softly, "Hi."

They turned to look at her, all of them, and she resisted the urge to step back. The smiles froze on her faces, and one returned weakly, "Hi."

There was quiet, and Claire was certain she was going to cry. But before she could excuse herself and make her escape, one of the girls said, "It's Claire, right?"

Too afraid to speak, Claire simply nodded.

The girl smiled oddly, as if unsure of herself. "We had a... Chemistry, I think, together." She frowned at her own sentence, then smiled again, still with its strange twist. "I think you were Kerry's lab partner. Remember, Marie? You were in it, too." She glanced at another girl in the circle, who nodded.

"Yeah. With Mr. Kim. Honors."

Claire nodded again, and scolded herself again. "Yes. I remember. Holly?"

The first girl nodded, relaxing a bit. "That's me! I wasn't sure you..." she hesitated, and, seeing Claire's confusion, rushed to continue, "well, no one was really sure you cared for other people."

Claire was even more confused, and Marie hurried to explain further. "Well, you always wore those dark clothes and long sleeves, and you never smiled at anyone, so we figured you were a loner."

Claire opened her mouth automatically, knowing a reply was needed, but she could think of nothing. She was suddenly so very angry. "You..." she swallowed, "No one ever tried to talk to me."

"Come on," a third girl said, annoyed. "That's impossible.

I'll bet you just didn't talk back, and no one else bothered trying."

"Kyra!" Holly hissed.

"What? I'm probably right, and you know it. I'll bet someone at least tried to tell her to smile, and got blown off. Right, Kevin?"

The boy froze, then said quickly, "I don't think so." He turned to Claire and said apologetically, "Sorry, but I do believe you. I think people were too afraid to talk to you."

Claire laughed incredulously. Others? Afraid to talk to me? She shuddered at the irony.

Marie offered hesitantly, "I think that maybe people would talk to you more if you smiled a bit. You know, just a little? Otherwise it seems like you don't want people to—"

"Everyone!" Claire cried suddenly, hot tears blurring her vision. "Everyone tells me to smile! Why should I? Why does everyone else smile? When they're angry or sad or tired they smile anyway! Why? Why? Why?" She realized that her voice had increased to the point that she was nearly screaming. She looked about, tears spilling over and clearing her vision, to see everyone staring at her. After a moment of silence, whispers started up, and people shifted closer to talk behind hands.

Claire stepped back without thinking. "You—" she choked on her words and stopped to gather herself. "You're all cruel," she finally said deliberately, "and horrid."

Someone said something in the back, and the cluster started laughing. As the comment was whispered around, the laughter swelled until nearly everyone in the room was laughing. The one girl in the group who hadn't spoken, Aria LeRouge, looked stricken at those laughing. Claire spared her a brief glance before her anger seized her tongue again and spoke for her. Spoke in place of her heart, which sobbed in agony.

"Why are *you* laughing? You don't know anything about me! At least I know you're all liars. I know that you all tell lies and

smile when you're not happy. I know that you're all liars!"

The next time she was aware of herself, and her anger had settled to flickering coals in her stomach, she was on her street. I will make paper cranes, she told herself, and shall have one thousand paper birds as my friends. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she entered her house without stopping, without listening, without thinking.

She was so upset that when she was spoken to, she snapped back. The coals of anger flared, and her own self was lost behind the flames.

She was in such shock that she never tried to move when the knife searched for her skin.

She was so far from herself after the pushing of her classmates that she never thought to calm herself with poetry as she lay dying.

She was so strange in the eyes of her classmates, the ones who didn't know that they were the ones who drove her to anger, that all accepted it when they were told she had committed suicide.

***

Eiji's eyes searched those of the circle, flickering from person to person. He smiled brightly, and he looked absolutely mad. "Well, that's strange! The freshman honors group is nearly the same as the juniors', isn't it? Marie, Kevin, Holly, Kyra, and Jaquile. Kelly and Kerry, Tyrone and Michelle, Sarah and Christopher. Irene, Jordan, Wendy, DeAnn, Blake, Blair, Andrew, Jamie, Searra. Lee and Tori." His eyes found each as he spoke their names. His eyes settled on the last, "Aria," and his smile tightened. "In fact, I believe that the only difference is my presence instead of Claire's.

"Now, I know you may be disappointed in this 'ghost story', for where's the ghost? But fear not! This is a ghost story in two ways." He held up two fingers to the frozen group. "One, it is a story about a girl who is now a ghost, and second," his eyes went cold, "it was a story told to me by a ghost.

"You see, when someone is killed, meaning that they died by a method not machinated by their own body, things remain with them. Memories, pains, angers. Desires, wishes, regrets. Ghosts can share these with some people. Some people can talk to them, see them, help them. These people can channel the presence and powers of ghosts to complete actions. Like, oh, I don't know," he tapped a finger against his temple, "make people understand how painful one's life was. Not the pain of being beaten, or the pain of dying slowly. Oh no. The pain of living."

Eiji looked about the circle and smiled, eyes brittle. "I can't share the emotions I receive, though. I can only help ghosts physically interact with our world.

"So, shall Claire help you understand her?"

There was a moment of frozen silence, cold anticipation as pent up fear twisted through people's chests. After five seconds, ten, fifteen of nothing, the fear began to melt, leaving people in hollow nervousness. All except Kyra.

"That was awful," she scoffed, voice just barely trembling.

"Making up stories about someone who's dead. You're just trying to make people feel sorry for you because you're quiet like she was."

Eiji looked at her calmly, his gaze steady and clear. "You're not smiling."

"What?"

"You should smile," he tilted his head, "so that people will like you. That's how it works, isn't it?"

"You—"

Her words cut off abruptly, and she stiffened. She began to laugh, weakly, then hysterically. She clutched her chest with one hand and her face with another as she looked around the circle. Her eyes were wide with shock and fear. They were so utterly different from the rest of her face that Holly actually reached over to touch her shoulder, to ask if she was all right.

"It hurts."

Hand freezing midair, Holly looked up. Standing over her, dark hair falling over one shoulder, was Claire.

"It hurts," she repeated carefully. She pointed at her face, at the crudely carved smile, and repeated, "It hurts."

Kyra fell back, smile frozen on her face.

Holly let out half a scream before she, too, felt her breath catch in her chest and heave out forcefully, each breath forcing more and more air from her lungs until she felt she had none left, and even then, she couldn't stop laughing. Her laugh seemed less from the present and more from the past as her gaze fell on Claire. Then her laugh, too, froze into a smile as her heart gasped and stopped. One by one, the members of the circle laughed, writhing until their hearts stopped and their smiles were stuck into place. All the while, Claire's soft voice repeated in the background, "it hurts, it hurts," as if reminding them that what they felt matched her own pain.

When the group was silent, unmoving in a circle, Eiji's eyes moved to fall on Aria LeRouge, who found herself unable to move from sheer terror. He smiled gently at her and gestured to Claire. Aria dumbly looked over at the mutilated face, which suddenly seemed gentle as Claire said, "Thank you. First day."

It took a moment for Aria to recall the first day of school, when she had approached the strange girl in the back row and asked her name. She had not received an answer.

Aria blinked slowly, and when her eyes opened again, Claire was gone. Aria looked straight ahead, her dead classmates in her peripheral vision, and stared at Eiji.

He smiled brightly and clapped his hands together. "Oh, right. *The end!*"

The Swamp Witch

Molly Howard

How to Plan a Destination

Jeff Horner

Walk until the landscape changes;
find a crooked, crawling willow;
trace its roots to the clay-red river;
sleep until you're different.

Pace until the blue moon ages,
far past golden, crumbling milestones;
wrap each in your traveling satchel;
weigh them; know their difference.

Seek a wayward homing pigeon;
teach it English; send it southward;
have it ask your only question;
leave before the answer.

Run your compass round in circles;
find the edges of each corner;
leave each bread crumb like a question;
burn the map behind you.

Sound a trumpet, bang your cymbals;
fight for peaceful resolution;
scream into the blood-blue chasm;
wake beside the river.

Walk until you see your mailbox;
paint it red to suit the river;
nail it shut, and weed your garden;
dream of all that's different.

Contributors

Yana Babak:

Yana is a Fine Arts major with a pathway in Graphic Design here at A-B Tech, transferring to UNCA in the fall. Her art philosophy is very simple: to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary.

Lex C Brenner:

Lex is actually a figment of your imagination. Whoa, that's weird.

Charles H.M. Brown:

Charles Brown is a part-time student who has recently returned from overseas and decided to pursue his interest in creative writing and literature as a whole.

Jennifer Lynn Browning:

Jennifer Lynn Browning has been an instructor at A-B Technical Community College since 2000. She is a writer, photographer, and scrapbooker.

Ruby Marguerite Carlson:

Ruby is a lover of all art, and art that can tell a story is the best of all. She hopes to one day have the courage to write a novel, but for now, short stories and poetry will do.

Christian E. Donaldson:

Christian Donaldson is a full-time student pursuing a degree in Mathematics but enjoys the arts in her spare time. Recently, Christian has been using poetry as a therapeutic outlet to cope with the sudden, tragic death of her two year old daughter. Christian also has an 8 year old son who motivates her to keep going.

Joanna Guy:

Joanna is not an individual; she is an energy. In her photographic journey, she is learning to convey the visual perspectives she encounters and hopes to inspire a way of thinking beyond the individual. Follow her on instagram @perpetualpresentphoto.

Jeff Horner:

Jeff shrugs with practiced gravitas.

Molly J. Howard:

Molly Howard likes plants more than people.

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Reginald is a full-time student who will be graduating in the fall of 2019 with an AFA. Reginald enjoys drawing and painting and plans to further his art career after graduating.

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Ben Latter is a student at A-B Tech. He always remembers the hyphen.

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Nicole Lavoie is a full-time student at A-B Tech and has been painting for over seven years. Her preferred medias are oil and acrylics, but she also enjoys watercolor. She has formed her own style, and even sells some of her works. Nicole loves to create pieces that stir up memories and portray the beauty of the natural world. She hopes her artwork will encourage others to do what they love as well.

Todd M. Lemiesz:

Todd is a musician/artist living in Candler, NC.

Meagan Lucas:

Meagan Lucas is a Pushcart nominated fiction writer. Her short work has appeared recently in: *The Same*, *The New Southern Fugitives*, and *Still: The Journal*. Her debut novel, *Song Birds and Stray Dogs,* is forthcoming in Spring 2019 from Main Street Rag Press. Meagan is an Adjunct Instructor at A-B Tech, and the Fiction Editor for *Barren Magazine*. You can read more at: meaganlucas.com.

Jackson W.S. Miller:

Jackson moved to Asheville a few months ago. A few months before that, he never would've thought of being here. Life came to him in weird ways, ways he couldn't begin to comprehend. He's 18. What could be so important?

Wesley M. Osigian:

Wesley is a part-time student who writes poetry, fiction, and scripts with his brother.

Ellen J. Perry:

A teacher of literature and humanities, Ellen J. Perry's academic interests include British studies, women's history, and Southern culture. Her original fiction appears in several journals and anthologies including *Steel Toe Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, and *Momaya Short Story Review 2018*.

Mark Damon Puckett:

Mark Damon Puckett (markdamonpuckett.com) loves supporting *The Rhapsodist* and teaching classes at A-B Tech. He recently taught himself the piano and has been playing popular and jazz music. He has four graduate degrees in English, Creative Writing, African-American Studies, and Poetic Technique. Author of three books of fiction, he just completed a novel based on a short story, "The Logophobe," first published in this very journal in 2018.

Sam Roy:

Sam is a full-time student who writes essays and poetry on occasion.

Zainab Sayed:

Zainab is a dual enrollment student studying education but focusing on personal development in creative writing. She has been writing novels, short stories, memoirs, and poetry from a young age.

Kayla Sessoms:

Kayla is 20 years old and has been at A-B Tech for about 2.5 years. She enjoys learning, reading, and writing. She loves God and is currently very active at Brookstone Church. She also enjoys being healthy and going to the gym, and she runs in open heats of Obstacle Course races.

John D. Shackelton:

John is a lifetime educator/learner.

James Watkins:

James Watkins is a poet who writes within the American ecological tradition. He is inspired by classical Chinese and Japanese verse forms, the philosophies of Ch'an/Zen, the poetics of imagism, and the literary styles of magical realism. His first book of poetry, *Mountains in Miniature*, is currently available on Amazon.

Summer Brianna Whiteside:

Summer Whiteside is a 20 year old potter, raised right here in Asheville, NC. Previously she worked mostly with watercolor paints, but after one ceramics class she was hooked, and now she has made it her life. Nature is her biggest inspiration, so she works with lots of natural and organic forms and designs. Often her pieces include heavy textures as well as sculptural elements.

Beverly Williamson:

Beverly Williamson is a PROUD member of the A-B Tech English Department. She has one son, one husband, two dogs - and that's enough for anybody!

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